Collector

Larissa Cleveland

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By: Larissa Cleveland

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Art in Imaging Arts

Rochester Institute of Technology

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Name (Committee Advisor) Prof. Elaine O’Neil       Date

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I am greatly indebted to the many people who participated in this photographic project. They allowed me into their lives and shared not only their possessions but a piece of themselves as well. Their willingness, interest and enthusiasm for the arts and an investigation into the human condition made this project possible.

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Finally, I wish to recognize the tireless effort and support of my family throughout my academic career.

- Thank you.
I dedicate this project to my father, Ron, and his passion for collecting the physical remnants of our familial history.
This thesis compliments my photographic investigation into an individual and societal preoccupation with collecting and the narrative or symbolic power of objects. My experiences as a child surrounded by my father’s mass collection of civil war artifacts prompted my continued interest in the pursuit of collecting and also to question the nature of hobby versus obsession. In this paper, I consider the personal and social conditions present in Western society that inform an inherent need to possess, create order, gain status, knowledge and to preserve. I discuss the creation of a persona through possession, but also question to what extent one’s identity is interdependent on those possessions.

I began my thesis by placing advertisements online and in community centers in which I invited people to pose with their collections in their homes. The domestic spaces emphasized the intimate nature of the images and suggested a dialogue between owner and possession. This relationship creates a portrait of psychological expression, but also of the universal desire to derive meaning through possession.

The photographic medium supported these basic human desires to possess, preserve and express, allowing us to begin to imagine realities based on what is represented. The title of each image references my own interaction with each person and
perception of the experience. This thesis reflects my interest in the curiosities of human condition, while the accompanying images become a photographic collection of collecting itself.
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INTRODUCTION

“Every passion borders on chaos, that of the collector on the chaos of memory.”

– Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*

My experiences as a child surrounded by my father’s mass collection of civil war artifacts prompted my continued interest in the pursuit of collection, as well as my questioning of the nature of hobby versus obsession. Although in the past I’ve worked in many mediums, I feel I can best express my interests using the camera. I am fascinated by the many curiosities of the human condition and I find endless opportunities to explore these interests in the boundaries of the lens-based portrait.

My interests lie in creating images that speak to an inherent need to surround ourselves with material possessions. These images represent an investigation into an individual and societal preoccupation with collecting, and the narrative or symbolic power of objects. In creating this thesis, much consideration was given to the personal and social conditions present in Western society that inform an inherent need to possess, create order, and preserve, as well as to gain knowledge and status. These images speak to the creation of a persona through possession, but also question to what extent one’s identity is interdependent on those possessions.
PART 1: CONCEPTUALIZATION

In the far corner of the second floor of my parent’s old Victorian house is a large room whose door was always closed. The familiar smells of old leather and rust seep from under the wooden door and fill the hallway. My father’s collection of civil war era artifacts that fill this room were a constant source of fascination throughout my childhood, begging exploration and inquiry. Instead of playing with dolls and teddy bears, I sat on union soldiers’ cavalry saddles and blew on a one hundred and fifty year old trumpet (figure 1.1). I made forts out of civil war textbooks and we had family ‘relic hunts’ in the garden after my father buried bullets in the flowerbeds. Needless to say, my father’s passion for his collection was an everyday presence throughout my youth. It was this upstairs room full of precious objects and my father’s tireless fascination with them that has inspired this series of work.

I first began photography with serious intention as an undergraduate at Kendall College of Art and Design in Grand Rapids, Michigan. My earliest work consisted of vacant and dilapidated buildings and landscapes – a typical beginning it seems in most college students’ photographic careers. My interests lied in form and color, with little regard for content and meaning, thus leaving me with pictures that held my interest for only a short period of time. It wasn’t until a professor forced me to make a series of self-portraits I found my passion for portraiture. However, I was intimidated by portraiture, taking comfort in the solitude of the abandoned buildings and landscape imagery I was making. The self-portraiture allowed me
to explore new territory and I began to express my thoughts and viewpoints through photographing the people around me (figure 1.2).

During my junior and senior year of undergraduate study, I completed a body of work called *Of Women and Horses*, in which I immersed myself into the lives of women who took part in an equestrian lifestyle. This was an obvious choice in subject matter for me because I had ridden horses since childhood. I had experienced the unique bond that forms between a person and an animal, and I wanted to capture it with photography. Through word of mouth, I found about thirty subjects of varying ages who were willing to let me photograph them. The equestrian sport world is one of the few athletic competitions in which men and women compete side-by-side. It is a sport in which a man’s superior strength serves no advantage, and although physically taxing, a woman’s guidance, motherly instinct and intuition can serve as a gift more powerful than muscle alone. This body of work was inspired by my observations of horse and rider, and also by my own experiences as an equestrian. It was my goal to illustrate the relationship between a woman and her horse, resulting in a visual examination of the dedication and unspoken bond that exists between them (figures 1.3 and 1.4).
It was with this body of work that I found my passion for investigation of the social landscape. I was beginning to realize a certain preoccupation towards creating human typologies. At this time I was greatly inspired by the work of photographer Sally Mann (figure 1.5), finding her intimate and somewhat controversial black and white images of young girls of the American South captivating and nostalgic. This led me to create many smaller series of work that summer involving the social groups and people closest to me.

The work of Tina Barney also greatly influenced my series *Of Women and Horses* and continued to be an inspiration as I entered graduate school. Barney is best known for her ‘lifestyle’ portraits of the upper class, most of her models are family members (figure 1.6). In undergraduate school I felt I could identify with her work because it was her mission, as it was mine, to photograph what she knew. In this way she was able to express her subject matter on an intimate level. Her imagery walks a fine line between being staged and candid. It was through her work that I also became familiar with the photographer Larry Sultan who also often worked with familial themes.

I finished my Bachelor of Fine Arts degree and began graduate school at the Rochester Institute of Technology in September of 2006. I had gained technical knowledge working as a
commercial photographer in combination with my undergraduate studies, so upon arriving at RIT I wanted to push myself to try something new. Using the first year of my graduate studies as a time to experiment with different ways to communicate my ideas, I took the technical tools I had mastered and began to flesh out new ideas.

It was during the first week of class, when working on an assignment for Elaine O’Neil’s Core class, that a direction for my interests became clear. We were asked to make miniature books for each day of the week. The subject matter was open, just as long as we had seven books with imagery for the following class meeting. This was meant to be a simple exercise to jumpstart our creative workflow. Feeling overwhelmed (it was the first week of graduate school) I reverted back to what I was most comfortable with, photographing old barns and abandoned buildings for some of the books. On the fifth day of working on the assignment, I noticed a junk store that was nearby my apartment and decided it might make for an interesting subject. After getting permission from the owner, I wandered through the endless aisles of furniture, books, china, toys, old clothing, art and other pre-owned objects. Towards the end of my visit, I came upon a very small shoebox in the corner of the store. I opened the box and inside was a tiny pair of children’s shoes (figure 1.7). They were white, with laces, were covered in scuffs, grass stains and dribbles of white paint. It was obvious the shoes had been well loved some years ago. I thought back to my first pair of shoes and recalled that my parents still had them, tucked away in a drawer in their closet. From time to time my mother would pull out the drawer, recalling stories from my childhood as she touched each item within it. Although the objects
were of no use to our family now, the memories that they held within them were precious and so they were kept as a reminder of times past.

I looked back at the small white shoes and began to wonder how they ended up here, who they might have belonged to, and what stories they might tell. The shoes had initiated a new creative path, so I decided to buy the shoebox and the shoes.

I was fascinated with the symbolism and sense of nostalgia these shoes emitted. I wanted to make work that spoke to an objects’ ability to describe its owner, to hold meaning, and to facilitate memory. I went back to the junk store and photographed multiple boxes full of objects that people had brought in to the store to be sold. My idea was that the contents of each box would begin to form a persona and suggest the character of its former owner. The junk store itself was the perfect metaphor for the concept I was beginning to form. It was an epitome of proof for our quest to possess and to derive meaning through possession. By photographing the shoeboxes full of possessions, I felt I was essentially continuing to make portraiture. In the store, I photographed the contents of the boxes in many different ways. First, just as I had found them. Then I took a forensic approach, taking the objects out one at a time and photographing them on a simple white background. I then began to arrange the objects in the shoeboxes and photographed the entire shoebox on the white backdrop (figure 1.8). Concurrent with my work in the junk store, I was also asking friends and family to make what I was calling ‘memory boxes’ for me to photograph. I discovered this term, while searching for other artists that might be working in a similar vein. By
typing key words such as ‘objects, memory, possession’ into a search engine, I came upon an article about patients in Alzheimer’s facilities who made ‘memory boxes’ as a means of preserving self. Doctors found if patients kept a box of important objects in their rooms it helped to trigger certain memories which may have been previously thought lost.

Chinese artist Hong Hao’s photographic series *My Things*, deals with his own personal possessions. (figure 1.9) His focus rests on the objects themselves in order to narrate his life story. Collecting objects from around his home, he created large collages in order to describe himself, as well as contemporary Chinese culture. Looking at his images “close up invites a moment of intimacy, a glimpse into the life of the artist, a discovery of contemporary China and a chance to pick out what we would find in our own homes.”¹ Much like the images I was making I found his work considered the psychological impacts of personal belongings along with memory.

Initially, I felt very strongly about the ‘memory box’, but as the weeks went by I began to feel a disconnect between my real interests and the work I was producing. The images seemed cold, almost sterile, and lacked the connection between owner and possession I was hoping to achieve. I was also disappointed by their reception. It seemed that the lack of context made them less interesting for the viewer, possibly because they were not able to experience meeting the owner of these possessions as I was able to do.

¹ “Hong Hao,” Chinese Contemporary Gallery Online 2006.
I began making the images that would become my thesis work after a weekend with my family in Michigan. I had not been home for several months and as I entered the house I was met by the familiar museum-like smells of my father’s civil war collection. In the living room, muskets casually leaned up against the corners of the walls and a sword in its sheath now graced the mantle over the fireplace. It was apparent to me that my father’s collection was slowly beginning to intrude into other areas of the house. I began to consider what an immense impact his interest in historical preservation had been on our family. It occurred to me that photographing personal collections could be an interesting way to discuss the importance of possession in our culture and I could make the work more accessible to its audience by keeping it within a domestic setting. This might also help to maintain the intimacy I felt my previous memory box images were lacking.

**PART 2: MEANING, INFLUENCES AND HISTORY**

My interest was in making pictures that spoke to an inherent or innate need to surround ourselves with material possession. This resulted in a larger investigation into a societal preoccupation with collecting. I was very intrigued by the social conditions present within each scenario that might inform that individuals desire to possess. My personal experiences with my father as well as a few close family friends have led me to believe that in Western culture specifically, we create a persona through our possessions in order to express and represent ourselves. This led me to question to what extent one’s identity is then interdependent on his/her possessions. It seemed that this shift towards a more
straightforward form of portraiture would enable me to better explore my ideas and questions.

Now that I committed to a new approach that might better express my ideas, I began my search for people who might be willing to be photographed with their personal collections in their homes. I posted an advertisement on the ‘artist’ and ‘creative gigs’ section of Craigslist, an online community database where people can post anything from houses for sale, and job offerings, to relationship requests. To my surprise, I began receiving inquiries about the nature of my project almost immediately. The people who contacted me were more than willing to participate in the project, even excited to have a chance to share their passions and interests with another person.

My first subject was a young woman who had managed to amass almost 300 pairs of shoes (Figure 2.1). I photographed her in her parent’s residence, where she was temporarily staying while working her way out of debt. She explained to me that she had moved out to Las Angeles to pursue an acting career, and had begun buying expensive clothing and shoes in order to ‘look the part.’ She had always loved shoes, but while in LA she felt a greater pressure to dress a certain way. Eventually, her circumstances lead her back to Rochester in order to recuperate before giving Las Angeles a second try. She continued to buy shoes. I wanted her image to not only show the extent of her collection but also to express, however subtly, her present situation and state of mind. In order to convey the overwhelming physical presence and
emotional grasp the collection of shoes had on her life, we began to set them up in rows by pair, not only covering the floor, but also covering the bed, dresser and chair. She sits on the floor, glancing downward, her hands clasped in her lap as if in prayer. Ironically, when I asked her to sit, she knelt down on the floor hiding her feet from view.

It became obvious to me as the work progressed that there were many different reasons for people to collect. Many collectors I encountered insisted that monetary value was a secondary factor in their collecting. While some admit that status or the validation of ownership may in part be a cause for pursuing their hobby, others said it was first and foremost for the pursuit of knowledge and preservation, or as a means of connecting with other individuals. Some psychologists have suggested humans feel the need to collect objects to overcome feelings of anxiety or loneliness. Other experts theorize that collectors are acting to assert control over objects and create order in their world.

During a history and criticism lecture given by Prof. Therese Mulligan, I found the photography of August Sander particularly interesting in conjunction with the work I was making (2.2). The theme of Sanders’ work was based on a philosophy that “placed man within a cyclic model of society.” His interest in creating typologies via the portrait, were of great inspiration to me. His use of the surrounding environment to describe the individual was

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intriguing. I was using a similar approach, my intentions were somewhat similar to Sander’s, in that my work would encompass people from many different social groups. My goal was not to show our separateness, but instead to show our commonalities. Sander’s portraiture was simple and straightforward. “He gave a controlled and intentional hint at the origin and profession of the sitter through the background or through clothes, hairstyle and gesture.”¹ I hoped to use these same simple tactics to form my own sociological portraiture, giving hints to the subject’s demeanor and personality.

It was my intention to show a relationship between owner and possession. I wanted to create a portrait of psychological expression, which included the universal societal desire to derive meaning through possession. Photographing individuals with their collections in the home proved to be an important element in attaining this expression in the work. Domestic spaces emphasized the intimate nature of the images and suggested a dialogue between owner and possession (figure 2.3, figure 2.4).

Part of what I loved about making this work was the first hand account from the
collectors about their possessions. As my work progressed, I realized that a reference to my
personal experience with each person was not conveyed in the work and was an important
part of my process. So I began experimenting with the inclusion of text with the imagery. I
settled on short statements or sentences that spoke to my experience. My intention was to
give obscure information that might ask the viewer to question what was outside the frame of
the image itself, giving the photograph another dimension for consideration. Phrases like
“There was a dress for every pair,” or “She used to hide them,” force the viewer, I believe, to
reexamine the image to reveal the meaning of the statement or how it orients reception of the
portrait. The secondary function of the text was to reinforce my attempt to express the
personality of the collector. While some statements are humorous when paired with the
image, others are very serious or even sad.

I initially tried placing the text directly on the photographic paper with the image, but
aesthetically I found it distracting. I then had the text engraved onto trophy plaques that
might be used when displaying a collection and mounted them below the image. Initially I
felt good about the outcome of the engraved signs, but after Walkthrough at the end of my
first year, I again felt I needed to try something different. Although the plaques were
generally well received, it seemed all conversation centered on them and not the imagery.
After much debate with my committee members and other faculty, I finally settled on
displaying the text as a glorified title. They would be printed on title tags,
but much larger than traditionally
made (Figure 2.5). This solidified the
importance of the text to the overall work without dominating the imagery. This approach led to a greater integration of my presence as author and the presence of my subject – the collector.

As I continued this work I found there were many artists interested in personal possession and narrative quality held by objects. (Figure 2.5) From French artist Sophie Calle’s work, I was able to draw many parallels to my own. Her detective-esque imagery deals with issues of ownership, human vulnerability, identity and intimacy. She often includes panels of her own writing. She made the series The Hotel, while in Venice, working temporarily as a chambermaid. She photographed guests’ belongings while cleaning their rooms and imagined their persona in accompanying text tied to deadpan, gridded images.

In addition to Calle, American photographer Brian Ulrich provided an alternate pictorial approach to images of collecting. Brian Ulrich’s work focuses on exploration of consumer culture through portraiture and urban landscape. His project titled, Copia features places where material possession and objects dominate such as shopping centers, retail stores and thrift shops. Although his work speaks more to aspects of consumerism than my own, I find interest in the subject matter and can relate his interests to my own. (Figure 2.6)
While working on my thesis project, I encountered new technical issues that I had not yet dealt with in earlier bodies of work. Lighting was a constant challenge because every home I went into had a different layout, size, ceiling height and color. Thus, the spaces I had to work with were often very limited and less than ideal. Initially, I went to subject’s house with no prior experience. I would simply show up hoping for the best. Although I had lengthy phone conversations beforehand, I would have roughly an hour with each person to see the collection, assess the space, set up, and produce a compositionally satisfying image that lined up with my intent. At the suggestion of Prof. Dan Larkin, I began setting up initial interviews with each subject at their home, prior to the actual shoot in order to better assess the situation and begin to brainstorm (figure 2.7). My prior experience doing on-location commercial work came in handy: I fell back on many techniques I had learned, including using wireless flash units for lighting. I knew that traditional strobes would produce much more light than was necessary and would also be cumbersome. Instead I used flash units controlled by wireless remote from my digital camera. The flashes were small and compact, and did not require a large light stand. They could even be set on a tabletop or on the floor if needed.

As I continued to photograph new collectors it occurred to me that most of the collections consisted of objects that had no practical use, or were not being used their intended purposes. Some of the collections held historical value, such as my father’s civil war artifacts, but others seemed more intangible. *Collecting in a Consumer Society*, by
consumer historian Russell Belk, analyzes collecting in contemporary culture by combining anthropological, psychological and sociological approaches. Belk’s conclusions resonated with my own ideas, helping me to solidify my intent. “Just as it was natural to paint Madonnas and seek relics of saints in a time and place when Christianity was the center of sacred power, and to assemble cabinets of automata, wonders from the new world, and natural curiosities in the time and place in which science was emerging as a sacred center, so too is it natural to collect and revere mass produced objects and artistic depictions of such things in a consumer society in which consumer goods become the central focus of our dreams and desires.”

Many of the collections I photographed consisted of mass-produced objects (figure 2.8). To the collector, personal worth was just as important or more important than monetary value. I found my subjects were more likely to collect mass-produced items rather than objects of nature, fine art or antiquity simply because our modern society has been built around the power of mass consumption and nostalgia. Although I’ve read many opinions on the subject, I cannot come to any sort of conclusion as to whether this type of collecting has a positive or negative effect on the individual, simply because I think with each situation the role of the collection in the persons life greatly varies. The utmost importance is the collection itself, whether rare or ubiquitous is tied to an individual

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collectors’ memory – a favored past, person or event. My intent is not to make a definitive judgment. Instead this body of work asks the viewer to come to their own conclusions based on personal experience, and beliefs.

It became obvious to me that possession within collections acted as conduit for memory in most situations I photographed. As the subject would introduced me to their belongings, stories would arise as they held and considered each piece. As I watched the woman place each teacup delicately on the table, I was reminded of the introduction to scientist John Kotre’s book, *White Gloves*. In this book, Kotre discussed the memories brought forth by a pair of white gloves worn by his grandfather: “The gloves were only a small detail in my father’s story, but for some reason they spoke to me, and I felt a great release of emotion when, in my mind, I put them on. They seemed to cleanse me of guilt and confirm a path, seemed to connect me to a mythical ancestor who sacrificed himself for me. There was a life in them, my grandfather’s life.”

The immense and poetic ability of an object to implore such emotions fascinated me and propelled me to further investigate the phenomenon in my work (figure 2.9). In *Collecting in a Consumer Society*, Belk wrote of the positive impacts of collecting: “Once objects enter a collection they become memory cues that recall the stories of their acquisition or conjure up associations with a more distant past. And as a part of extended self, possible contributing to

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symbolic self-completion collections may help us to feel better about ourselves. Thus, while collection is undeniably materialistic, it does not necessarily involve terminal materialism. Its nature leaves open the possibility that collecting may be good for us as individuals. I find this statement to be particularly true as I relate it to my own experiences with my father. Although he is very aware that his collection has great financial value, its personal pleasure, historical value and the sense of duty it gave him far outweighed any amount of monetary value.

It would be very difficult for me to walk into some one’s house simply because I am curious about them and their belongings. But the camera becomes a license of the merit of my intent. It allows me into a situation an outsider might otherwise not be allowed. Through my thesis work, I have seen the power the camera holds, and as a photographer, I have found that people want to share their interests. The act of being photographed can be a very validating.

The work of Diane Arbus has always been of interest to me (figure 2.10). Her portraits of the eccentric and unusual are intriguing and inquisitive, although she encountered criticism by many for demeaning her subjects. In my own work I strive to make considerate imagery, not to say the images I take are objective. I feel it is impossible to create a photograph that accomplishes this, but it is not my intension to insult or degrade. More then anything else,

I identify with Arbus’ curiosity. In the book, *Diane Arbus*, audio recordings from classes she taught at Rhode Island School of design are transcribed: “My favorite thing is to go somewhere I’ve never been. For me there’s something about just going into somebody else’s house. When it comes time to go…it’s like a have a blind date...And sometimes I have a sinking feeling of, Oh God it’s time and I really don’t want to go. And then, once I’m on the way, something terrific takes over about the sort of queasiness of it and how there’s absolutely no method of control.”\(^7\) I empathize with her thoughts, as I have had the same emotional experience on many occasions, bordering on voyeurism in my role as author.

While researching artists, I also became interested in the history of collecting. It is well documented that the origins of the personal collection dates back hundreds of years. From our earliest records of civilization, it is apparent we have always possessed an inclination to collect objects, but it is only in the last few hundred years that people have had the ability to indulge in collecting in great numbers. The Renaissance gave rise to an “explosion of scientific and collecting activity in the 16\(^{th}\) century that emanated from Italy.”\(^8\) Until this time, collecting had largely been an activity of royalty or the church, whose interests concentrated only on objects that were beautiful, precious – therefore reinforcing intent of status and power.

\(^7\) Diane arbus book

One of the first great personal collections, which would later be dedicated to the first American museum, was owned and documented by artist Charles Peale in the early 18th century. This private turned public museum included artifacts of natural history (fossils, taxidermied animals, insects), books, and art. It is noted that the museum held as many as 100,000 artifacts and 269 paintings. In 1822, Peale made a self-portrait in which he lifts back a heavy red curtain to reveal an archive and acquisition of knowledge of both the rare and the familial to the viewer. (Figure 2.11)

The modern age also marked a turning point in the history of portraiture and still life. Art broke away from its theological confines as a new awareness of pending mortality - partly due to the overwhelming interest in collection - inspired the need for many to leave something of themselves and their culture behind for future generations. As one historian noted, Charles Peale’s “preoccupations with collection illustrated an acute awareness of mortality, of an inexorable passing of time and of those dear to him. By making the self portrait, he felt he was establishing a permanence and thus cheats death of its triumph, through portraiture”9, and the preservation of objects in his museum.

In more recent times, cultural and technological advances encouraged a “new spirit of inquiry that was driven by scholars and amateurs,” 10 whose interests lied in the pursuit of

knowledge and inquiry. The modern era of the 17th century realized the introduction of the ‘Wunderkammer,’ or ‘Cabinet of Curiosity’ which first appeared in wealthy Dutch homes. The new availability of objects from foreign lands and an interest in the sciences gave rise to private museums, of cabinets or even large rooms filled with everything from religious relics to taxidermy to works of art and other oddities. These quickly became the centerpiece of the household, as a place for entertainment and study. The Industrial Revolution and the subsequent emergence in mass production that followed motivated not only the growth of consumer culture, but also a general rise in income and leisure time, thus promoting an inclination towards collecting in the average household.

As I considered the history of collection, it became apparent to me that the photographic medium itself emerged from the same basic human desires to possess, preserve and express, enabling its viewers to fix a reality based on a tangible referent – the object, person or event photographed. Both the photographer and viewer have shared intentions – to preserve ‘that which has been’ or as Roland Barthes expressed in Camera Lucida, ‘the thing itself.’ The photograph provided an unrenlentless form of personal and cultural validation of possessing and possession. As the author and photographer or this work, I was in essence producing my own photographic collection, commenting upon the act of collecting – achieving symbolic relationship and intent I set out to create. For the viewer, the work plays the role of evidentiary artifact, allowing them to examine and investigate, as they would a specimen in a museum.
PART 3: PROCESS AND REALIZATION OF THESIS EXHIBITION

This thesis work was photographed with a full-sensor 13-megapixel digital SLR camera, and a 17-85mm F2.8 lens. Initially, I experimented with a medium format camera and digital back which would have given me the highest level of quality, but I felt the cumbersome nature of the camera itself was hindering my creative process. I opted for the SLR, as it enabled me to work quickly in varying domestic circumstances. Selection of images for the final exhibition seemed obvious as the show neared. Collection subject matter that was duplicated was taken out, as well as images that lacked compositional interest, or did not fully support the overall intent of the project.

A discussion about the idea of exhibiting a single object from each collection along with the images had been discussed in multiple meetings with my committee members. My intent was to bring the actual objects out of the realm of the domestic and into the gallery space as a means of helping the viewers to understand the importance and narrative power of the object for its owner. After much consideration and debate with my professors, I realized that the imagery I was making along with my text was enough to tell the collectors’ stories. Filling the gallery with miscellaneous objects would only draw attention away from the real focus of the show and the message might be lost.

My intent was to print the images large scale in order to allow the viewer maximum opportunity to inspect the details of each image. After some experimentation with both inkjet and digital chromogenic printing, I opted for the chromogenic prints after I discovered a very well priced print shop in New Jersey, which produced my test prints beautifully. There are nineteen images total in the exhibition and are printed thirty by
thirty inches square. This was the first time I had worked with a square. Because each image varied so drastically in form, content and color, the square shape of each image helped unify the series; it was one element all the images had in common. The congruent nature of the square format felt comfortable and enhanced the intimacy of each image, aestheticizing to a great degree the look of a traditional documentary image. This presentation was also a component in Arbus’ work, enabling her to construct documentary oriented photography that took on a larger aesthetic gravity and proportion.

The intent of the shadow-box-like frames mirrored the display presentations of three-dimensional objects, and delicate or fragile items. The frames are metal and stand three inches deep off the wall. Each chromogenic print is mounted on Masonite and then affixed to a thin wood block, upon which the frame is installed. This type of frame is called a floating frame and is generally used to display paintings on canvas, allowing the artwork to ‘float’ in the center of the frame without touching the sides. My photographs are recessed about 2 inches into the frame, which gives the appearance of a shadow box without glass (Figure 3.1). I felt this look would further enhance the intimate nature I wanted to convey, by helping the images to appear fragile and enclosed. My framing presentation sought to create and reinforce within the exhibition space display of aura.
Deciding on the title for the series was extremely difficult for this body of work. I became aware on the immense nature of the topic I had taken on and a flood of words seemed to fill my head. Artifact, hobby, obsession, consumer, portrait, persona, possession, humanity, identity, eccentric, preservation, order, status, knowledge, memory were words that continually presented themselves whenever I discussed the work. I began making lists of these words and putting together what ended up being obscure lists of possibilities, but in the end I went back to the root of what I was displaying. Although using the word ‘collector’ may have not been the most creative title, it seemed to be the most logical. It would instantly engage the viewer to what they were about to see, no matter if they were looking at the sign outside the gallery, a poster or postcard. I decided to use a few of the ‘key words’ off of my list of reoccurring themes as a subheading as a means of explaining my intent, allowing the viewer to begin to digest my concepts. In the end, I chose the words, ‘collection,’ ‘possession,’ and ‘persona’ which I felt began to pinpoint a few of my basic interests in making this work.

My work was displayed in the Kunstler Gallery in Booksmart Studio located downtown in Rochester. I had shown work here once before, which helped to quickly assess the immense size of the gallery. My committee was kind enough to assist me in the layout of the show, which seemed almost predetermined once we had them all in the
gallery. Many of the images drew connections to one another, which created an interesting flow to the work. (Figures 3.1, 3.2, 3.3) For example, I had three images that dealt with animals, which fit perfectly on the back wall of the gallery space, and two images that discussed the human form, which fit on the middle wall together.

Just as I had finished hanging the show, two women who did not know me and had never seen the work came into the gallery. I was able to hear their discussion about the imagery, which proved invaluable. As they walked from image to image, they began to recount stories of their own possessions and past memories that were sparked by what they saw. They also both chose the image they identified most with. For me, this was the kind of empirical validation I needed that my intention in my thesis work was successful (Figure 3.5).
Conclusion

Towards the end of my thesis work, I was contacted through the craigslist posting by a man who had come into possession of a home in foreclosure. He told me the story of a woman who had lived in the house for almost 50 years and died there with no family to collect her belongings. The house was in dire need of renovations - everything had been left just as she had it when she died. He told me I had free rein to photograph the house for my project. When entering the house, I was overwhelmed by the sheer amount of things that had been amassed. It seemed this woman had held onto everything she had ever owned. Every scrap of paper, every container, there were multiple collections of stuffed animals, photographs, mirrors, dolls, religious figures, toys still in the packaging from twenty years earlier – the list went on and on. There was barely room to walk in any of the rooms in the house. Throughout this project, I had considered where the line might be drawn between hobby and obsession. It was here that I realized the true extent of an obsession with material possession. These objects had become her crutch, her means of holding onto control. They were also her vessels of memory – memories she was afraid to let go. As I walked through the house I felt her belongings could tell her story, her interests and passions. I felt an overwhelming emotion of sadness as I realized her legacy, amassed over a lifetime would soon be relegated to the empty dumpster sitting outside the house. Stuck on the fridge in the kitchen was a weathered piece of paper with the following phrase written in an anonymous hand:
“Consumed and wrought with the things of ownership; we fall in hand into a heap of meaningless junk. Or, we rise and swim in treasure, realizing we own nothing.”

The shock I felt finding something so poignant was enhanced by a juxtaposition of its surroundings. The effect was overwhelming.

I look forward to continuing this body of work in the future with new subjects. As I come to the end of my graduate studies, I feel my imagery and thought process have come full circle and will be represented in my exhibition, Collector - collection/possession/persona. My interest in a societal preoccupation with collection and the power objects have to speak to memory has been fully realized within this work. My intentions are remediated through the photographic means in which I convey my ideas, as the photographic medium itself emerged from the same basic human desires to acquire, possess, collect and preserve.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


