Patterns of Collecting

by Holly Barbaro

Stepping across popular memory, generations and continents, even our most humble of collected possessions can be imbued with great value. Patterns of Collecting: From the Bower at The Johnston Collection reveals the secret life of our collectibles and how we may unknowingly be collecting in collective parallel. Curated by artists Deborah Klein, Louise Saxton, Loris Button and Carole Wilson (the Bower artists), items from each of the artists’ personal collections sit alongside the permanent collection of The Johnston Collection (TJC). Carole Wilson speaks about the exhibition and the ties between the artists’ art practices and each other.

The Bower artists are all connected in various ways – as friends, from exhibition collaborations, and as academic colleagues. The exhibition’s concept can be traced to Saxton’s and Wilson’s exhibition Gardenesque in 2004, that revealed their shared interest in garden and domestic architecture. In fact, all but one of the artists’ studios are located in a garden. Klein and Button joined the conversation and Wilson says that after visiting each other’s studios it “got us firing – we all had areas of (collecting) commonality. We all kept sewing paraphernalia from our mothers and grandmothers such as sewing boxes, buttons and knitting gear”. Uncanny similarities were discovered such as Saxton keeping a cigarette tin of drawing tools from her grandfather, as did Button, passed down from her own father. The artists’ residencies from overseas and from travel also formed strong shared patterns in each of their collections.

The Exhibition
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The Prophet from Lebanon

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The Johnston Collection

The Johnston Collection

The house museum environment of The Johnston Collection is a departure from the white cube gallery spaces of the previous exhibitions. Founded by antiques collector William Johnston, the house museum in East Melbourne has a permanent collection of Regency and Georgian furniture and decorative art arranged in a domestic setting. Wilson muses that exhibiting in any space has its rewards and challenges. The Art Gallery of Ballarat offered voluminous wall and exhibition spaces providing great possibilities for display. It also came with ornate heritage skirting boards that had to share the exhibition space. TJC conversely has reduced wall hanging spaces, yet provides a rich domestic context for the Bower’s collectables. Wilson says the artists aim for their pieces to appear vibrantly against TJC’s spaces.

The interplay between TJC and the artists have both resonances and dissonances. Wilson points out their collectible items do not have a monetary value or age comparative to TJC’s objects. On the other hand, the artists have travelled to India and are drawn to TJC’s objects with an Indian provenance. The artists all relate to the travel involved to accumulate TJC’s collection.

Most profoundly, TJC and its collection have spurred the creation of new work by the artists. Wilson is drawn to working with old, reclaimed floral carpets, often discarded in contemporary house renovations, and has refashioned pieces in response to the urns in TJC’s collection. TJC’s mirrors, bronze items and silhouettes have also inspired new works by the artists.

The Patterns of Collecting range of exhibited objects are vast and eclectic, encompassing tea sets and cups and saucers, grandparents’ salt and pepper shakers, vintage clothing, embroidered coat hangers, a toy sewing machine circa 1950, maps and atlases, a plate souvenir from the War Memorial in Canberra (Wilson hails from Canberra), a yellow serving ladle from Penang, and even an optometrist set meticulously maintained in its original blackwood box, gifted by an ex-boyfriend.

The touring exhibition won the artists popular praise having iterations in the Art Gallery of Ballarat and the Warrnambool Art Gallery. Wilson was approached by visitors telling her they relished seeing everyday collections honoured in the museum. They told her that after feeling chastised to trim down their collectibles, they now felt they had permission to enjoy them. Wilson notes that in an age where cluttering is admonished and pathologized, both older and younger generations felt vindicated and reinvigorated to collect.

Detail from The Kitchen, MENAGERIE from Loris Button ‘an accumulation of items and objects associated with my families lives accumulated over time’, courtesy of the artist © Image by Adam Luttick, Luts Photography, Melbourne, VIC.
Broader Patterns

The existence of ordinary or found objects in the art gallery has some history, such as Claes Oldenburg’s Mouse Museum or Marcel Duchamp’s ready-mades. The Bowser artists venture beyond this countercultural and anti-commercial positioning into the personal and feminine – the bower – honouring family relationships, particularly the unsung efforts of mothers and grandmothers.

Artists as collectors is also a known phenomenon and psychiatrists maintain that playing and interacting with objects stimulates creativity. Artists’ collections were examined in Magnificent Obsessions: The Artist as Collector at the Barbican Art Gallery, London, in 2015. Recognising historical artists’ collections such as Rembrandt’s compulsive collection of naturalia (such as shells, corals and other natural objects), Degas’ and Monet’s collection of Japanese prints, and Picasso’s collection of African masks, exhibition visitors could inspect Andy Warhol’s cookie jars, Sol LeWitt’s shoes and Damien Hearst’s collection of taxidermy. The examination offered fascinating insights into the artists’ practices, yet only two of the fourteen artists in the exhibition were female. The Barbican explained that this was less than they wanted yet they found “the person who is more likely to focus in a very singular manner on a particular type of acquisition often tends to be male.” Patterns of Collecting will show that women, too, are avid collectors, and challenges the imperceptibility of their collections.

As a young artist, Wilson was a founding member of Jilpotters, a feminist, underground poster group. Decades later it seems the Bowser artists’ examination of gendered and delineated spaces is still as relevant and contemporary as it ever was.

Collective Work

Wilson describes working in the artist collective as an interesting experience, enriching and challenging, and one that has triggered ideas between them. She enjoys working in a group and alone, but points out that artists working together is common within the group exhibition genre. Within the collective, the Bower group’s roles are democratic and shared. They are keen to present a mix of their practices throughout the house rather than individual silo presentations. They do allocate tasks according to their individual strengths. For example, Button is particularly skilled in spatial drawing so she often draws the exhibition designs, and Saxton has developed a greater familiarity with TJC’s collection given that she previously curated much of TJC’s collections.

Musing on the idea of a bower, Wilson tells me that the name was Saxton’s idea, yet all the women have their own connection to it. Bowers are places to create and collate, and are traditionally the preserve of women. For Wilson, bower birds have played a significant and early role in her life. She fondly recalls travelling to the coast of New South Wales as a child, and her dad’s eagerness to see the satin bower birds there. Wilson recalls appreciating the early role in her life. She fondly recalls travelling to the coast of New South Wales as a child, and her dad’s eagerness to see the satin bower birds there. Wilson recalls appreciating the

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SELECTED FURTHER READING


For a case study on collecting as furthering creativity and an extension of play see Dr S. Mackesy, ‘Art Collecting As Play’ Lady Charlotte Schreiber (1812-1885): Visual Resonances, Vol. 27 No. 1, 2011, pp 18-31


For the exhibition publication of Magnificent Obsessions: the artist as collector see Lincoln Drexler, Magnificent Obsessions: the artist as collector. London: Barbican Art Gallery, Munich: Prestel, 2015.
by Inga Walton

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