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Birds, Buttons, Brontosauruses, and Belugas

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Everybody needs a rock. I’m sorry for kids who don’t have a rock for a friend. I’m sorry for kids who only have TRICYCLES, BICYCLES, HORSES, ELEPHANTS, GOLDFISH, THREE-ROOM PLAYHOUSES, FIRE ENGINES, WIND UP DRAGONS, AND THINGS LIKE THAT—if they don’t have a rock for a friend. —B. Baylor (1974)

I collect things that drive my curiosity; a small selection of those items inspired this body of work. Handmade and repurposed materials merge with printmaking and transform into books that invite the viewer to consider the possibility that flea market finds and lost buttons can hold a bit of joy and wonder. My curios gain new life as soft floral dinosaurs dealing with bullying, an industrious bird building a fashion empire, a desire to hoard things that might be useful, and a somewhat conflicting eBay listing.

Found tucked into floorboards and old boxes, many items were left behind when my brothers moved out, forgotten at the bottom of toy boxes, or gathering dust in the attic. I scavenged through my family’s home and garage attic, looking for lost and buried treasure; instead of jewelry and gold, I found broken ornaments and lost hardware. Many are discovered lost by others on sidewalks or dropped in parking lots; others were found while exploring lakeshores or riverbeds, and at least one was discovered at the last rest stop at the edge of a desert. I must carefully explore all stalls and booths on meticulous hunts through flea markets and thrift stores. Scanning every inch, hoping for something to catch my eye before leaving. I rarely leave empty-handed but make my selections with the utmost care. Acquisitions from my most recent trip to an antique mall are a small empty gift box for a ring, two linen handkerchiefs, and a small bag of vintage buttons.
The COVID pandemic restricted my hunts to internet markets, Etsy, eBay, and Amazon. I was concerned about traveling and exposing friends and family to strange germs. It was harder to stumble upon unusual finds or curious objects that grabbed my attention, but the anticipation of its arrival in my mailbox was worth the wait.

In my exploration of the things I collect, the underlying question is “why?” Why do I not feel settled in a new place until my collection is unboxed, sorted, and reorganized? Why when feeling anxious or bored can I dedicate hours to carefully dusting and reorganizing my objects? If one were to separate me from my collection, it would likely have little meaning beyond arbitrarily interesting things. In The Cultures of Collecting, an anecdote that resonated with me, speaking about a friend who collects paperback books. “My friend knows that once he is gone - that nobody is likely to keep his shabby shelves intact. He and his collection are, in a sense, inseparable. Without him, his book collection may not even be perceived as a collection.” (Elsner and Cardinal) It is likely that when I am deceased that my collection will cease being mine, separated and pieces even finding their way back to those antique stores and flea markets where I found them. However, it is not a legacy I wish to create with my collecting habits.

In my search to answer why, I spent time reading about the history of collecting. I am fascinated by cabinets of curiosities and Wunderkammer, the idea of a personal collection of all sorts of natural and handmade items from around the world. Cabinets of curiosities, Wunderkammer, wonder-rooms, spaces that began appearing in Renaissance Europe, could be as small as a
drawer or as multiroom libraries filled with objects. (Mauriès) Beginning as an attempt to classify the world, organizing objects into categories, natural history, geology, archaeology, ethnography, historical artifacts, religious works, and works of art. Many early scientific disciplines were sparked from the rudimentary attempts at gathering and classifying objects in the world. These spaces quickly become status symbols, and competitions of the world's greatest clockmakers created more complex and amazing automatons, music boxes, and jeweled objects. The more unique and rarer the object, regardless of its provenance, the more prestige a collection gain. Strange creatures like mermaids challenged the understanding of the animal kingdom despite being stitched together by their dealers. (Kooppe)

In my ideal world, I would be able to gather all manner of items that fascinated me, being able to organize them and marvel at them at my own leisure. Collecting plants, animals, rocks, artifacts, and oddities that attract my attention, being able to pick them up and closely examine them at convenience. Museums are wonderful archives, but the limitations in physical access and the public nature of these spaces aren't enough to meet my desire for ownership and access to these items. However, through further research on private curiosity collections, I quickly fell into the complexities of the legal, ethical, and ecological implications these collections had and continue to have on the planet and global society. The Renaissance sparked a new age of Exploration. European monarchs were sending armies and explorers out across the globe to claim new lands and bring back interesting objects. New peoples and lands were "discovered" and classified, and new cultures were deemed strange and backward; objects of cultural significance and even remains were brought back and exhibited both publicly and privately.
(Koepppe) The new exploration and interest in science spurred on the alienation and strangeness of non-European cultures, being categorized as lesser and unintelligent. Cultural artifacts, antiquities and even remains were taken back to Europe to be displayed and “kept safe.”

Modern debates about museums’ repatriation of cultural artifacts or human remains are often in the news. Some of the most famous debates involve the British Museum & the Elgin Marbles, objects were gathered in less than ethical circumstances, some outright stolen or refused to be returned. (Clark) In 2021, a debate sprung from a popular social media app, TikTok, regarding the ethics of private ownership of human remains. Debates included when bones stop being a person with human rights if these bones were stolen from gravesites, the rights of Native tribes or cultures to receive stolen remains back. However, I’ve never personally desired to own a human bone, the debate was enough to begin looking more specifically at the objects I collect or stumble upon on eBay or in a flea market for example, a whale skeleton. ("A TikTok Bone Salesman’s Wall of Spines Reignites Ethical Debate over Selling Human Remains")

I explored the psychology behind collecting, finding a few articles that covered the habits of collecting observed in children. However, many of those articles often reasoned that children typically begin by collecting objects from nature, as they are easily obtainable. "They foster play, creativity, experimentation and have been described as "catalysts to inquiry" and "hypnotizing and irresistible to children under six years old, almost calling to be touched, stacked, carried, or collected." (Sutton) From personal experience, as a child, I often spent time carefully organizing my collection of precious objects. Unique stones and shells gathered from family trips, half a
lobster claw from some family dinner, and porcupine quills are all hidden away from my siblings in a repurposed jewelry box; lined with velvet, these objects were protected and exclusively for my own enjoyment. The 1996 study "Kids as Collectors" interviewed 79 first and fifth graders about their collections, and many of those children admitted having some type of collection. Many of these children felt that collecting relieved boredom, "something to do when I get bored," was a common response to the interviewers. Some children suggested they collected because they enjoyed looking at their things, organizing them, using them, or satisfying curiosity. (Baker and Gentry) I would be interested in further research exploring play and collecting. The research I was able to find did mention that this is a subject that has not had significant study outside of an educational standpoint and commercial gain.

Maurice Rheims even went so far as to describe the categories of collectors in his 1961 book, Art on the Market. He distinguishes the dedicated fanatic from the dilettante collector. With a "gotta catch them all" fanatic-like devotion, the former will search high and low to track down the final piece needed to complete their collections. The latter has developed or even holds an instinct for perfection and beauty, indiscriminate in what they collect but only that it holds to their standard of harmony. Both rejoice in the thrill of the hunt when they bag their prizes. (Rheims) Rheims mentions a third category, the curio-collector I more closely relate. This collector is far less interested in having the complete set but often is far more varied in the objects they collect. They may not be able to define exactly what they are looking for fully but "know it when they see it." The moment of excitement and discovery when one finds tucked back in a corner display case in an old antique store an object that gives such a feeling of joy that must be acquired. I can
see parallels to the previous research interviewing children regarding their collecting habits, and some aim to get the entire set. In contrast, others are more instinctual in what they add to their collections.

Why did I purchase an empty gift box for a ring, two linen handkerchiefs, and a small bag of vintage buttons when I went to an antique store? Because they gave me a little bit of joy when I found them. Why did I pick up a walnut on the sidewalk on the way to class? Because it was interesting. The following work asks you to be just as open and curious about the things I collect as I do and perhaps even give a bit of joy as you interact with my books. At the very least, my intention is for the viewer to begin to look at objects and collections in a new way.

**Methodology:**

Classifications and categories separate the idea of collections from junk drawers and hoarding.

To organize my research, I have separated my work into three categories, Things Actively Collected, Things Accidentally Collected, and Things that Got Away. The first two categories reflect items I own or are influenced by, whether conscious choice and active searching or chance. The final category reflects wishes and missed opportunities and reflects the troubled nature of collecting.

Objects in the first category included plastic toy dinosaurs, feathers, and bird watching. Items that inspired the second category, 'things accidentally collected,' included objects that could be useful later, such as buttons, hardware, or scraps of crafting material. This category holds plenty
of potential but can become a burden for storage and organization. The final category was more abstract, and I wanted a way to touch on the things that I probably will never own physically, these are items discovered in searches or desired. However, legal, moral, or ethical implications would be too significant.

I pulled from these categories to generate source material to create stories that invite the viewer to pay more attention to objects and perhaps find unexpected joy in them. The book format provided me an opportunity to create a narrative, as simple as a short story about a bird, to the psychological impacts of insulting prehistoric creatures. Unlike a framed print, a book requires participation from the viewers, creating a commitment to engage with the story, if only for a moment. Briefly, they may not know what comes on the next page or under a lid, anticipation grows, and a moment of discovery is shared, a way to translate the elation and discovery I felt when adding an object to my collection.

I was attracted to printmaking because of its flexibility and diversity in techniques. As an artist who often uses a wide variety of materials and techniques, I created a body of work that reflected my diverse collecting habits. Being able to switch from silkscreen to relief printing and exploring various bookbinding techniques and papermaking would be essential for me to create the stories I wish to express. I learned how to make my own dye from avocados, walnuts and other natural substances. This became essential in my later books, particularly the “It might be useful later” series where avocado and walnut dye were used to stain wood, tint the fabric
covers and interior pages and patina the three creatures, Filbert, Ms. Isabet, and Lou. Almost all my books, except *Terrible Plastic Dinosaurs*, used some aspect of walnut and avocado dye.

![Image of Filbert, Ms Isabet and Lou from “It might be useful later” series, dyed with walnut ink.](image)

An essential aspect of my work is play and material exploration. The materials used are an essential component and support the narrative of each book. Allowing myself to explore new materials and combinations of methods was integral to creating my work. I often began my making process through sketches and mockups. I have developed a habit of using the least precious materials in creating my mockups, finding that the least amount of attachment I have to those materials, the more experimental and daring my explorations to end up. For example, when initially developing *Terrible Plastic Dinosaurs*, I picked a range of materials I disliked but had floral fabric and mustard yellow cardstock in surplus. The resulting rough draft of sad stuffed dinosaurs struck an emotional chord juxtaposed against black and white photocopies of devastating statements about their intelligence. The hand-sewn stuffed dinosaurs and a
huggable cover encourage my viewers to pick up and discover a world of sweet floral print
dinosaurs being bullied by representations of prehistoric beasts. This book was the catalyst for
my thesis work. Many of the materials I've used link these books together: handmade paper and
ink, fabric, stitching, and stuffing. Elements of one book may travel to the next, reforming to tell
a new story about an entirely different subject.

Fabric and sewing become an interesting and valuable addition to my making process. Hand
stitching grew into a need to learn how to use a sewing machine to improve my skills further. I
inherited a sewing machine that sat in a closet for two years, and began to use in January of this
year. Rolling this into my toolbox of skills acquired from being a printmaker has given me a more
comprehensive range of solutions for my books. I found myself working backward and forward
between books, often deciding on materials before knowing the end goal and having a very clear
vision for the final product. Because each book was approached slightly differently, I'll discuss
them separately below.
Gallery Photos
Things Actively Collected:


This book grew from my fascination with vintage, poorly sculpted, plastic dinosaur toys; stumpy legs, fat, sluggish bodies, tiny heads, and simple black spots for eyes. I find their simplistic forms charming, but curious why are there so many stupid-looking dinosaur representations? I began researching early paleontology, searching through archives of books and articles from the late 19th and early 20th centuries that discussed the hypothetical fleshy forms of the bones discovered. I found that even more recent books, such as The Real Book about Prehistoric Life from 1957 describe Stegosaurus as having such a tiny brain, "the size of a walnut. 'Here was an animal that surely "wouldn't know enough to come in out of the rain!'”. Popular culture quickly became fascinated with these dumb dinosaurs, and the trope spread quickly through movies, comics, TV, and more.
A podcast from 99% Invisible led me to Bob Bakker, a paleontologist and paleoartist who discussed the rise of simplistic dinosaur forms and the dinosaur renaissance in the 1980s and 1990s. Initially, scientists and artists struggled with their hypothesis of how these early animals would have looked and survived dragging their heavy bodies around the landscape—describing them as slow, heavy creatures that must have had low intelligence and could easily have been conquered by man. Quickly these ideas spread throughout the media, and dinosaurs began appearing as monsters and beasts easily outsmarted by man. These stumpy, stubby, solid blocks of flesh and muscle are now represented in plastic form on my shelf.

My book, Terrible Plastic Lizards, juxtaposes simple dinosaur shapes inspired by my collection with harsh speculations about prehistoric creatures' physical and mental capabilities. Soft dinosaurs hand-stitched in floral fabric live their lives intersected with film stills from early motion pictures with increasingly upsetting statements about dinosaurs. They are insinuating that these plushie dinosaurs were "too stupid to save themselves" from their own extinction. The final pages finish with a squishy asteroid crashing to earth, finishing with a final image of Winsor McCay's 1914 animation of Gertie the dinosaur crying. (McCay).

My chunky plastic dinosaurs now have the additional emotional weight of being too stupid to save themselves from global annihilation. Perhaps I love them more for that.
*Discarded and Found*, 2021 Book, Handmade & commercial paper, walnut, and turmeric ink, assorted fabrics, acrylic paint, string.

When the Covid lockdown happened, I grew more aware of the birdlife around me throughout the early pandemic. My maternal grandmother was an avid bird watcher in her later years; her back porch birdfeeder was often entertaining when spending the weekends at her home. I pulled out her bird book with handwritten notes from her last few bird counts, and I learned to identify birds who lived in the woods surrounding my apartment. I watched the family of sparrows make a nest on one side of the complex and raise their young to fledglings who left their nests, only for the same pair to do it all again on the opposite side of the complex with a new brood. I watched a mob of crows steal a cardinal fledgling from its nest as its parents desperately tied to save it. I discovered a pair of red-tailed hawks raising their young on the sixth floor of an administrative building.
As I became more aware of the birdlife surrounding me, I became more curious about the lack of feathers everywhere. I grew excited every time I found a simple gray finch feather, the more elusive blue and white feathers from jays, the very rare cardinal feather. Shouldn't they be everywhere? *Discarded and Found* allowed me to create a reason why we aren't inundated with bird feathers like fallen leaves, and perhaps an important reason to leave the feathers where they are found.

The simple accordion fold book, to be displayed open, allows the viewer to follow along with a trail of multicolored feathers. The accompanying text tells the story of a dull brown bird who is industrious and fashion-forward. The feathers are made from handmade hemp paper and commercial paper. Some fabrics were dyed with avocado, turmeric, cochineal, walnut, and indigo inks. When you reach the final panels, you will find a small brown bird with her wings and tail full of found feathers, a mixture of paper and fabric feathers dyed with avocado, indigo shibori, and bundle dyeing techniques. The bird's body is made of handmade recycled paper dyed with homemade walnut and turmeric ink. She has no time to chat but must hurry home to work on her new fashion line.

It is a reminder to enjoy a feather when it’s found, but best leave it on the ground.
An Unofficial Bird Count at 73mph (casual observation at high speeds), 2022, Book, Relief Print, Silkscreen, thread, fabric and Walnut ink & paper

In January of 2022, I traveled across New York state several times; in need to keep my brain occupied despite podcasts and music, I decided to count birds along my routes. My grandmother was an avid bird watcher, often going on bird-watching trips to find rare and elusive species. Her notes in neat tight cursive list dates and locations of her sightings beside entries in her bird book. I kept a mental count of the number of these birds viewed in flight and roosting along Interstate 90 and Route 81 and limited my observations to a particular handful of birds, only counting hawks, eagles, ospreys, and smaller falcons (excluding buzzards and vultures).

Seeking to document this endeavor, I was inspired by a diary of a Nantucket whaler, who kept a census of the whales observed during their time at sea using a simple carved stamp. I chose to record my observations in the same manner by creating a set of four stamps to represent the birds observed in sequence as accurately as my brain could recall. Using a soft stamp matrix, I carved a hawk, a bald eagle, a small sleek falcon/kite, and a rather unfortunate stamp representing the birds not making it safely through traffic. I brush-dyed commercial paper with
homemade walnut ink to create an aged effect on the pages. The book is broken into three sections to document my three observation periods, and the stamps record the sequence of birds observed along my route as accurately as possible.

**Things Accidentally Collected:**

During my exploration of objects I collect, I have found a category of items that have been gradually gathering over time without my conscious desire. These things fall into our lives and can be judged as potentially useful. It is not quite annoying enough to spend the energy throwing them away or awarding them a dedicated storage area. Some things dropped under furniture or behind counters, some tossed into drawers or the tops of dressers, and handfuls of change; were found between couch cushions or under at the bottom of a bag. Things could be beneficial if one only had the need for that object or a crafty way to repurpose it.

These things have traveled with me through multiple moves, tossed into boxes and bags to be dealt with later. Buttons, thread, pieces of paper and fabric that might be needed at some point; screws and bolts, nuts and hangers, scraps of wire, safety pins and nails; larger things like extra cords and chargers, a useful box if I knew what to put into it. All that flotsam and jetsam of life add up at the edges of our homes.

To bring attention to these things, I have discovered a group of creatures whose job is to pay special attention to these bits of potential, and they scavenge in the spaces where lost things go. They are quiet but resourceful, rumored to be 30% dust bunny and a bit of dragon. These
creatures gather up their quarry to bring back to their hoards. They are assembled from scraps of fabric and bits of a useful sting, all united under the collective motto of "it might be useful later."
Fasteners & Fixers, “It Might Be Useful Later” Series, 2022
Snippets, Scraps & Fragments, “It Might Be Useful Later” Series, 2022
The "It might be useful Later" series is a set of three books that combine handmade paper, found objects, and silkscreen. It is a series of books built backward. I knew the materials I wanted to use and made the paper before knowing what I would make with it, in keeping with the theme of
things with potential. As I have been working throughout this year on my thesis, I have been generating several piles of fabric and paper waste, most just big enough to have too much potential to be thrown out. I knew I wanted to make hemp and abaca paper with inclusions. I shredded scraps of paper, fabric, and cigar box labels to form my paper sheets. The lighter patterned fabric scraps found their way into a blend of hemp, cotton, and abaca. The cigar labels were included in abaca sheets that were pigmented maroon and purple, while the last of the darker fabric scraps were included in abaca sheets pigmented blue.

The paper is split into three groups, ideal for three separate books, *Buttons & Toggles, Snippets, Scraps & Fragments, and Fasteners & Fixers*. I began experimenting with sewing to create the caretakers for each book, learning how to create three-dimensional figures that could support themselves, and blending fabrics and materials to create Filbert, Ms. Isabel, and Lou. As I imagine, they spend much of their time scurrying under cabinets, and among dust bunnies, they all spent twelve to twenty-four hours soaking in homemade walnut ink. The result shifted the fabric color and allowed the twine and string of their hair/fur to fray and frizzle, giving them a wild look. Once I created these creatures, I generated the stories and illustrations within their book, using silkscreen to apply them to the handmade paper pages.
Things that got Away:

*The One that Got Away*, 2022 Book, Handmade hemp paper, silkscreen, jute twine, pine box

To conclude my current exploration of the objects I collect, I found myself ruminating on a category of items that I do not physically own. This group of items may only ever exist in an imaginary curiosity cabinet tucked away in my mind. These are the things that were unobtainable for one reason or another or lost forever, or perhaps even never truly existed. In this group are books I find while browsing bookstores in my dreams, waking with the feeling that I was still holding them and can almost remember the plot. In this group are toys I remember having as a child that was lost or given away - a stuffed easter rabbit I set down in a grocery store and was gone when I turned back around, a dalmatian figure from a happy meal that I feel I only had for a few hours.
In this category is an object discovered during my early explorations of eBay. Unlike my explorations into antique malls or outdoor walks, one typically needs specific categories or search terms to find things on such a site. However, upon scrolling down through the listings, the spark of the joy and discovery became fireworks as I clicked on the listing:

**ONE ADULT DISARTICULATED BELUGA WHALE SKELETON, WHOLE $3000.00 (+shipping).**

Alas, it was not to be. A host of questions gave me pause. Can I own a beluga whale skeleton? Where did this person get it? Can you legally sell bones on eBay? Furthermore, I did not have $3000 extra to spend on what would have been the best addition to our small, shared living room. Nevertheless, it lives there in my heart, perhaps hanging above the new couch near the window where the neighbors walk a bit more quickly past. Instead, I will settle for a replica whale skeleton, made from handmade paper, string, not quite full size, and packed inside a crate with some packing paper hand dyed with homemade walnut ink.

**Conclusion:**

Few people have seen my entire collection of things. Instead, it is a relatively private collection, and the only viewers have been a few roommates, a handful of friends, and the maintenance workers who replaced the smoke detectors. Often when asked about my objects, I can only honestly say - "I do not know why I keep them; I just like them." These objects give me joy in a manner I can’t quite begin to define, but through this work I hope that my viewers can experience their own joy from these books.
The reception of my exhibition reflected how I wished my viewers to interact with my books, and I was able to observe people discovering each new page and opening boxes to discover tiny miniature workshops. Strangers encouraged each other to open drawers, trade books back and forth, and share the joy of discovery. In addition, to postcards I also gave away buttons and toy dinosaurs. The excitement of my viewers coming up to me to show what button they picked or dinosaur they choose was truly delightful.
Bibliography:


