

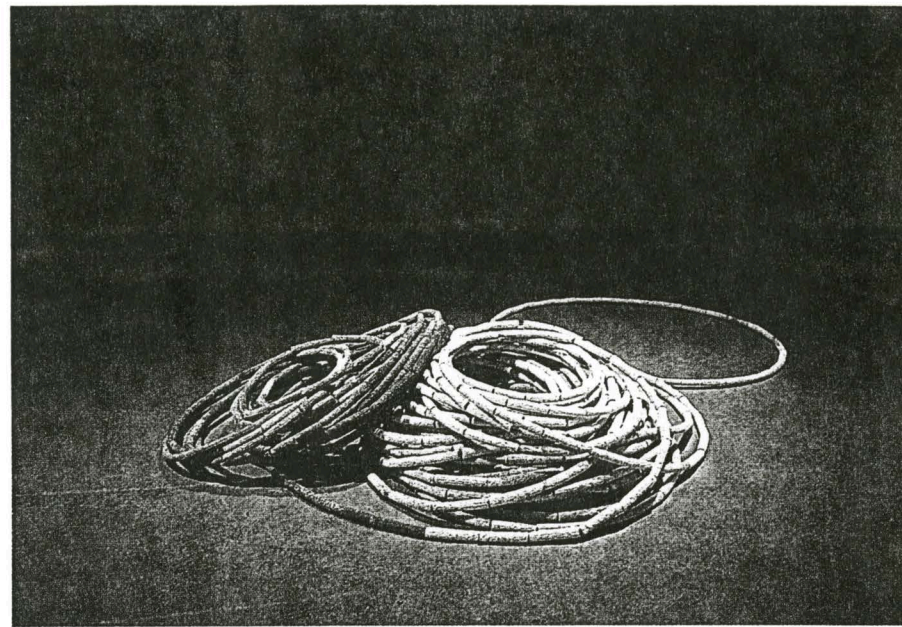
The Collectors

by Petra Halkes

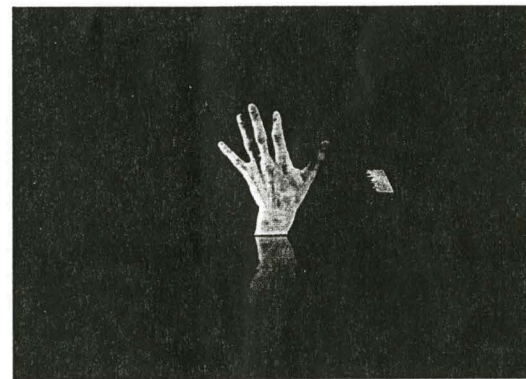
One day, not too long ago, I opened the door to my backyard and found it stretched out to cover the whole world. The virtual and surreal experiences brought by this boundlessness are at times exhilarating, and at times thoroughly overwhelming. When my own space melds so easily into the space of the rest of the world, where will I be?

One way to counteract the intangibility of the new world is to collect, to rearrange, to count and measure concrete things at hand. It is an artless way, less concerned with expressing oneself through the illusionistic or abstract ways of art, than with creating a sense of self through an extension into real space with concrete objects. This is the main impulse behind works gathered by Toronto artist Sarindar Dhaliwal for an exhibition which travelled from the Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston to the Ottawa Art Gallery this spring. "Of Mudlarkers and Measurers" shows the work of five artists who Dhaliwal got to know at the Banff Centre for the Arts. They are currently based in Barcelona (Antoni Abad), Toronto (Gwen MacGregor), Australia (Maria Fernanda Cardoso), Edmonton (Lyndal Osborne) and São Paulo (Regina Silveira).

MacGregor is a mudlarker, a term used in England for people who search the banks of the Thames at low-tide for valuables. On her sojourns to London, she looked for pins, buttons and clay pipes, items so common and plentiful that they are disregarded by the licensed mudlarkers, who make a living from their finds. For this exhibition MacGregor created a scientific-looking cabinet with plastic vacuum-formed trays containing buttons cast of clay in a soft range of colours. Every day a gallery employee drops two rows of buttons into a water-filled jar on the top shelf of the cabinet, where they dissolve into organic layers of sediment, reminiscent of the river bank where the original buttons were found. The work refers to the ebb and flow of nature, and



(top) Maria Fernanda Cardoso, *Nuevas Voces*, 1993, corncobs, metal, 91 x 152.4 x 121.9 cm. Photograph: Louis Joncas. Courtesy: Ottawa Art Gallery.



(lower) Antoni Abad, *Minor Measures*, 1994, detail, video projection, text, light box, cast aluminum, dimensions variable.

to natural cycles of disappearance and appearance. The allusions to science and the museum remind us of intrusive human intervention into natural processes, an intervention, this work seems to suggest, that can once again be re-aligned with nature.

Cardoso, who has for years been working with a flea circus, gave her fleas a rest to string together cores of corncobs for *Nuevas Voces*. In her book *On Longing* Susan Stewart draws a connection between parasites and the collector and reminds us of the word "flea-market." Objects in a collection are not produced by the collector, who depends, like the flea, on a host-economy and Cardoso's collection of eaten corncobs have plenty to say about parasites and hosts. On a most literal level they refer to the dependency of humans on plant-life, but the used-up cobs also allude to the depleting effects of a colonizing, consuming North American culture.

Corn, a staple that has been grown by Amerindians for millennia was "improved" in North America through standardization, which resulted in the extinction of many indigenous species. Yet, like all collections, these cobs take on other meanings in their new configuration and the different context of the gallery. The depleted hosts gather strength and beauty in a new design and speak with the "new voices" of the title.

Like Cardoso's string of cobs, Lyndal Osborne's collection of birds' nests collected for her work *Point of Departure*, could increase forever. "To play with series is to play with the fire of infinity," writes Stewart about the collection, and she goes on: "The threat of infinity is always met with the articulation of boundaries." Osborne's nests call up the push-and-pull of infinity and containment but while the birds' nests put the emphasis on infinity, they are juxtaposed with an assembly of square boxes filled with wires, representations of human habitat, the safety of four square walls.

Regina Silveira's drawing *Nomad (Office 3)*, also deals with the human desire to extend the self into space while simultaneously being situated in the security of containment. She begins her drawing with a banal photograph of an office cubicle which includes a computer, desk and chair. Following an idiosyncratic, quasi-scientific method the picture is elongated, pulled and stretched until the cubicle

seems ready to take flight, lifting the chair (and by implication the person in the chair) along with it. The final drawing, life size, clings like a shadow to the wall and the floor. In the secure surroundings of the office cubicle the nomad dreams of vast spaces.

However, such vast spaces when encountered in real life, can be rather threatening. In her catalogue Dhaliwal writes that Antoni Abad's work, *Minor Measures*, evolved as a response to his stay in Banff. The measures he took to maintain a sense of self in a country so foreign to Spain, was to concentrate on the empirical, mimicking the way our culture generally finds comfort in facts and numbers. Displayed on a screen set up like a lectern, is a text that spells out Abad's measurements of his day: "The distance covered in waking up, getting up, pissing, having a shower, brushing my teeth, getting dressed, going into the kitchen, making the coffee, raising the coffee to my lips." A film projection shows a huge hand measuring the wall in hand-spans, from one side to another, over and over again. On another wall, six life-size hands cast in aluminum, form what seems the beginning of yet another process of measuring, as well as a potentially infinite collection. What Abad's installation reveals is not only the meaninglessness of measuring, but its unintended side-effects. While measuring will yield numbers and facts that in the end prove meaningless, the effort of looking for meaning itself, not only yields new insights, but also creates beauty and pleasure.

For disrupted traditions and erased borders, the artists in this exhibition invented new rituals, measured lost time, recuperated lost objects, hoarded the detritus of nature, laid it out and rearranged it. And if there is a little absurdity, a little pathos in this process, it is much like life itself, in which we continue to scramble and rearrange the bits and pieces of our lives to create some semblance of wholeness, some sense of self. ♦

"Of Mudlarkers and Measurers," January 10 to March 9, 1997 at the Agnes Etherington Centre, Kingston; May 1 to June 29, 1997 at the Ottawa Art Gallery.

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