

Using a wide range of evidence, Colussi explores conflicts between individuality and community, intimacy and mundanity. Structuring the essay through this web of key terms, she develops an idea about the fragile human condition that is reflected in the objects we collect.

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SEARCHING FOR SOLACE IN A LEMON PEEL

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So often in fiction, people are defined by what they refuse to leave behind. If a character disappears and a police officer writes it off as them running away, it is nearly certain that someone will present a talisman and declare that their loved one never would have left home without bringing the sacred object with them. We accept this trope as truth, because we have all thought about what we would save first were our houses to burn down; we all possess and keep careful track of our own sacred objects. Though an obsession with the material is more often seen as a vice than as a virtue, the examination of the belongings we love, or even just use every day, is rich ground for discovery about both individuals and the universal qualities we share.

It is easy to criticize a modern-day fixation on objects; it seems, sometimes, as though acquiring is more essential than creating, as if owning is more important than giving. This critical point of view, however, ignores the potential that objects have in allowing us to create and imagine: what, in essence, they give us. In *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon*, Mark Doty falls in love with a painting of that same name. Through this love, this “being held within an intimacy with the things of the world,” he fosters a deeper connection with the strangers who pass him on a chilly Manhattan street, enabling him to investigate the paradoxical human need to both belong to and remain separate from a larger collective (4). The painting, a still-life depiction of a glass of wine, oysters in their shells, and a partially peeled lemon, evokes this paradox in its assertion that things such as smell and taste

must be set apart to be properly appreciated. Once these senses are combined, the once-disparate parts of the painting lose their individual vibrancy. The world functions best when it is a “dialogue between degrees of transparency,” when we appreciate that the light that hits the subjects in the still-life hits all of us, that it illuminates us in unique ways (5). Still, it is a universal desire of human beings to be loved by others, and, in order to be loved, we must make ourselves vulnerable. Doty likens this vulnerability to “nuances of transparency and reflectivity” when discussing the peeled lemons gracing the images of many Dutch still-life painters (9). The painters used lemons as displays of technical skill, uncurling the peels in lavish manner to demonstrate artistic prowess. Doty sees a strange egotism in these elaborately painted lemons, but also admires how the artists allowed each lemon to remain intimate and ordinary, able to assert its individuality just days before its inevitable decay.

Who sees the world through the curls of a lemon peel? Doty’s painting serves to reassure him: the impulse to exercise his rights as both a community member and an individual is a perfectly natural one. When we are faced with such contradictions, why would we turn to objects, rather than our values, ideals, or even our gods? Teju Cole, in his essay “Object Lesson,” suggests that it is for “some kind of solace.” We cannot talk with or touch our values, and it is just as difficult to book a meeting with the deity of your choice; instead, we take comfort in our domestic routines and pray to a cross or towards a city: physical reminders of the oftentimes unseen love and justice many of us believe to be inherent in the world. When we live in peaceful times, or at least in a peaceful place, we also require reminders of violence and loss to fully prove their existence to us. In his essay, Cole discusses the work of the photographer Glenna Gordon, who created an exhibition of photographs of the belongings left behind by the Nigerian schoolgirls kidnapped by the terrorist group Boko Haram. Since the actual act of violence could not be captured—and the moment of rescue has not yet occurred, nor does it seem likely to—Gordon took photos of things such as the girls’ uniform blouses, an image that reminded Cole of his own education in Nigeria. The power of Gordon’s photograph is two-fold: it “activated [his] own memories and emotional responses,” writes Cole, and emphasized not so much

the presence of the blouse, but the absence of the girl who unwillingly left it behind (“Object”). This negative space of sorts makes familiar what could be foreign. Just as Doty sees the “dark space within an embrace” in the chiaroscuro of his painting, Cole sees the violence and senselessness of the tragic fate of the Nigerian girls in the devastating emptiness of Gordon’s photographs (6).

Cole’s discussion of the photography of violence adds an interesting facet to Doty’s claim of a universal desire for community. We find solace in images that remind us of the kidnapped girls through our recognition of ourselves in their lives: we, too, slept with school books beside our beds and wore clothing our mothers labeled with our names. We allow ourselves to tolerate an otherwise unbearable contradiction: when we see photographs of genocide and natural disaster, we ask ourselves, how can we live like this? But when we view triumphant artwork such as Doty’s painting, we think, how can we not? By seeing ourselves as similar to the victims, we invite ourselves into their lives, imagining ourselves into their devastated families and community. Through this connection, we find closure. The domestic objects in Gordon’s photographs bring us closer to reality, though as Doty notes in his essay, it still remains just out of our reach: we see our own reflections in the lives of these students, rather than the students themselves, thus distorting their crisis while mitigating our own.

If such lofty ideals as the ones discussed in Doty’s essay are indeed universal, then it follows that they must also be mundane; a quality that all humans possess automatically may still retain a rare beauty, but its core is utility. For instance, all of us romanticize the heart, but it remains a muscle, bloody and ordinary, made to perform a singular task. Doty and Cole’s essays both celebrate the personal touch of the individual: a name written on the collar of a blouse, a lemon peel twirling downwards in a show of bravado, and the marks we leave on objects we use every day. Andrea Zittel’s installation *A to Z 1993 Living Unit* provides an interesting contrast to this focus. This work presents the furnishings of a room: a cot, a kitchen, and storage space. Though minimal, it presents a compelling portrait of someone’s life. By filling in the surroundings, rather than the face, of an individual, Zittel creates, as Gordon did, a portrait in negative space. The

installation, though furnished for a very specific, utilitarian sort of person, reminds us how little we need to live comfortably. It reminds us that the universal human habit of collecting, of making nests and safety nets for ourselves out of souvenirs and other belongings, comes not from a need to survive, but a paradoxical need to both assert ourselves as individuals, with our own unique tastes and styles, and to remind ourselves, through photographs, paintings, and other sentimental belongings, that we are a part of a larger community which we both contribute to and benefit from. Zittel's installation evokes in us both admiration and repulsion that a life could be lived so plainly, and that one would want such a life. We think we could easily live in such a place, but we could not imagine a single reason why we would want to.

When we investigate the wisdom of objects, we are attempting to navigate a world of contradiction: individualism versus community, the value of intimacy versus the value of personal sovereignty, and what we assume about others versus what we will allow them to assume about us. All of these works siphon meaning from the mundane, just as a still-life painting allows a close-up look at otherwise distant concepts. These art pieces demonstrate to us, through objects, the fragility of our human desires and needs and the value of this fragility. Though we may never see reality, we are reassured, through both our common tendency to collect what makes us comfortable and the differences in what we choose to collect, that we are real.

WORKS CITED

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