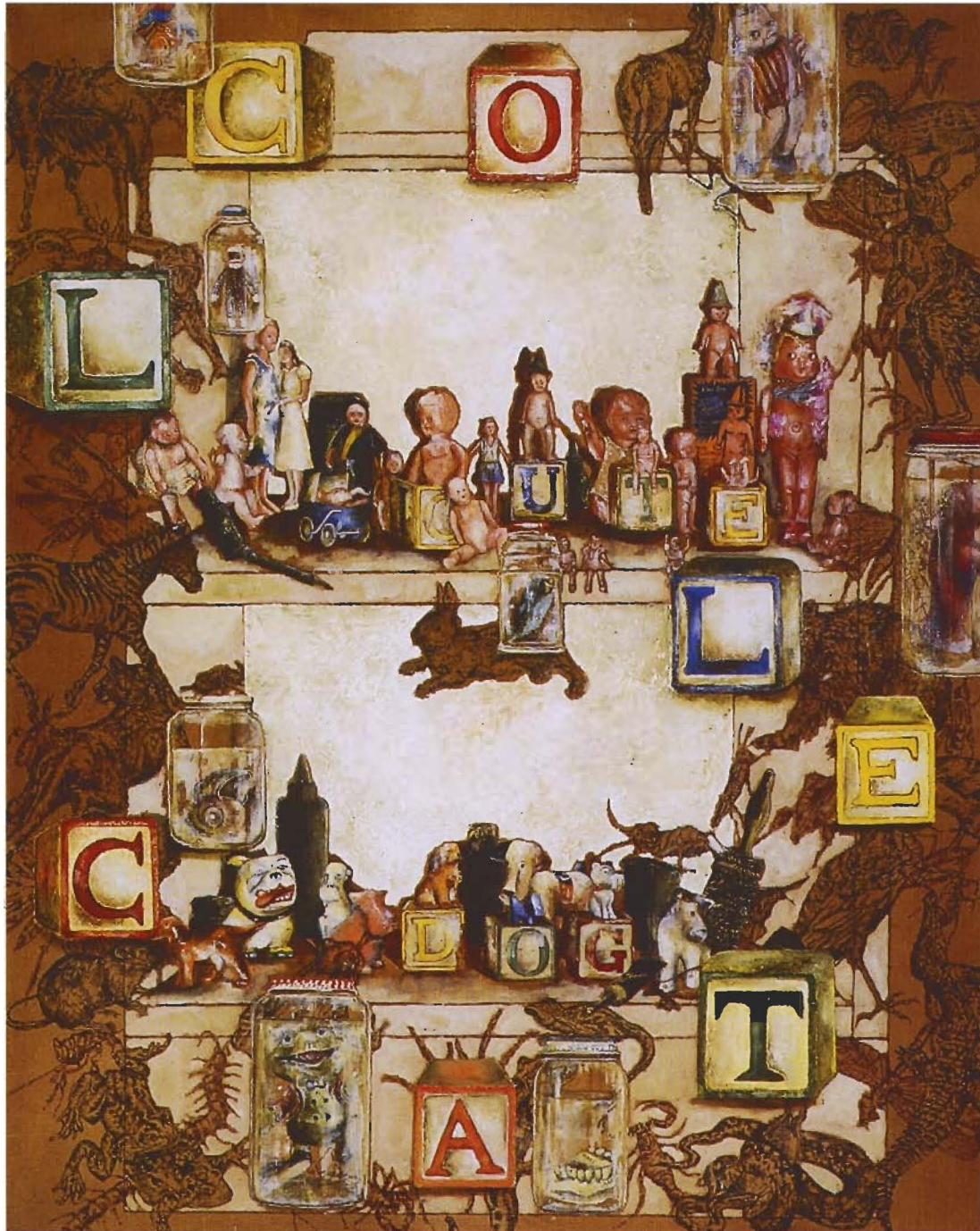


MARJORIE MOORE

Categories, Collections, and a Cabinet of Wonder



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

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CATEGORIES, COLLECTIONS, AND A CABINET OF WONDER

There are no limits to what people will collect. We systematically accrue odd cross-sections of everything from matchbooks and gimme caps to carnival sideshow memorabilia and religious reliquaries. Even the earliest museums, the Wunderkammern of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, displayed their hoards of disparate objects as collecting fever run amok. In these private and princely wonder cabinets, an avalanche of treasures from the New World – exotic animals, strange seashells, oddly shaped stones, rare flora and fauna – both assaulted and delighted the parochial European sensibility. Behind the seeming chaos of the wonder room, however, was a consistent ethos. Almost all of the natural objects were there because they fit one criterion: they showed nature wandering, jesting, stretching the limits of her domain.

But with the rise in the early eighteenth century of the new science and its rational approach to the study of nature, much of the wonder went out of the physical world. For all intents and purposes, the “wonders” became commonplace and a familiar part of human experience as each crisis over the proper niche of importations and local discoveries was resolved. Whereas the constant shift between imagination and reality often resulted in baffling juxtapositions, the era’s love for diversity, abundance, the odd and uncommon also gave rise to the notion of connoisseurship and taste. Academies devoted to specialized branches of knowledge gradually separated collections of *naturalia* from those of *artificialia* in a relentless effort to collect, classify and organize information into hierarchical

systems. Ever since, we’ve wanted everything to be spelled out, safely packaged for easy consumption. As places where logic and order reign as they never will in the streets outside, museums have played to our desire for rational explanations, numbing us to the unfamiliar and the mysterious. We’re told where to look and what to learn, until all curiosity is suspended. Nevertheless, the Wunder sensibility has managed to persist through the centuries since its seeming overthrow by its more positivist rival. And in a world dominated by disinformation, such labyrinths of confusion offer far more reflections of contemporary experience – a curious mixture of science and aesthetics, truth and illusion, fact and fiction. A few collections, such as the bizarre anatomical and pathological curiosa of Philadelphia’s Mutter Museum, have sought to reintegrate wonder in the world. The Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles is also a worthy heir to the wonder cabinets with arcane exhibitions that conflate science and art, thereby making both categories seem suspect. By breaking down categories that structure our “normal” perception, such collections assume a mysterious power that the art world has largely abdicated.

Yet it may be that every extreme gets the polar opposite it deserves. Accordingly, Marjorie Moore questions the systems of order we impose on the world. By finding situations where they break down, she reveals how fragile reality is and how much it’s based on shared assumptions and definitions. Her provocative reshuffling of systems of information mirror the fragmented and human self. By uncovering hidden layers of meaning, by pointing out inconsistencies in our world, Moore breaks down social and intellectual hierarchies and reintroduces the play

of intuition and lyrical metaphors. In this respect, Moore’s “Categories, Collections, and Cabinets of Wonder” is a deeply romantic installation. It aims to turn our world upside down with arrays of toys, dolls and bric-a-brac – the stuff with which the artist has surrounded herself since childhood. Her paintings, drawings and walk-in cabinet question the categories from which her collections emerge. Linnaeus, who designed the Binomial System of Nomenclature, ordered our world. Moore, however, attempts a reordering. By eroding the boundaries of science, popular culture, and art, new wonders appear that question our relation to the natural world. This kind of romanticism, of course, may be the one thing our culture can’t tolerate. What makes Moore’s world so magical is that here, among toys, children’s literature, natural histories and cultural detritus, nothing is nailed down. Rather, meaning is mercurial, thereby colliding our complex negotiation between nature’s construction of us and our construction of it. Focusing on the tension between chaos and order, perception and illusion, the ethereal and mundane, Moore folds systems of understanding back on themselves to confound seemingly distinct categories.

Significantly, Moore regards the work as autobiographical – a site for childhood predilections and interests that have continued into adulthood. She cites numerous and varied influences for this work, ranging from the skeletal studies of horses by George Stubbs as well as texts of Pliny the Elder and engravings by the eighteenth century French naturalist, Buffon, to her vast collections of metal wind-up toys, plastic horses, tiny dolls, and old sock monkeys. Like Alexis Rockman, whose paintings also reflect on the systems

of thought and representation that order our understandings – and misunderstandings – of science, Moore attempts a loosening of aesthetic and philosophical shackles. Moore, too, is a child of her era – raised near large urban centers, on media as well as printed word, with equal access to animation and old master paintings. She recalls frequent visits to the Smithsonian’s medical museum and a morbid fascination with its huge jars of elephant legs, fetuses and assorted freaks of nature. A childhood passion for the patterns of science influenced her decision six years ago to study the social structure of the Red Howler monkey in the jungles of Venezuela. Unlike the perfectly preserved creatures displayed in natural history museums, Moore found rotting carcasses in various stages of decay. She drew them from nature, then gradually blended the images of her toys, personal narrative and historical illustration into complex amalgams. Throughout, Moore brings to the world an aesthetics of immediacy, unembarrassed introspection, whimsy, and exploration.

Entering Moore’s “cabinet of wonder” is to freely indulge the senses in memory, nostalgia and sentiment. Viewers are encouraged to pull out the drawers filled with old postcards, clippings, toys and books, as well as handle and rearrange the material. In doing so, Moore offers an emotionally inspired art that aims to stimulate a dialogue between herself and her audience. Her willingness to let toys and images tell stories is delightful – we lose ourselves all the more quickly and happily in her “plots” because they remain unspun. We’re free to take any narrative cue in any direction we like. Overall, the cabinet invites time travel – the static time of nostalgia, unearned emotion which idealizes and savors the past at the



“Round and Round with Velasquez,” 1999. Graphite, collage on paper, 15” x 15”.

expense of the present. It mobilizes the past as a repetitive dream, a zone of sentimental reverie that can conjure remote experience into fictions of extraordinary clarity – the sweet whiff of a plastic sherbet-hued “My Pretty Pony,” the eerie glimpse of “Froggie” – mascot of Andy Devine, the MC of a 1950’s Saturday morning television program, the coarse texture of Bambi’s matted fur. Perhaps Moore illustrates time by registering its passage in terms of decay. Such ghostly visitations have a terrible control over our consciousness.

A collector’s involvement with an object is deeply personal. Clearly, a toy is by close association a semi-human object. Human is what the child wants his or her toy to be, the substitute friend or brother, but exempt from all the dreary rules attached to childhood and growing up, the eternal confidant

or companion, steadfast and unchangeable. That toys and their human owners should be able to enter adventures together is a dream that most children have. Still, the theme of the helplessness of toys, and the constant wear that life gives them, is always present. Holding an old copy of *Black Beauty* is to remember a book almost unbearable to read. Animals – as people – are loved and rejected, exploited, grow old and lose their beauty; no one who reads the book can fail to think about human nature. Moore’s vast Bambi collection summons forth psychic wounds that remain tender to the touch. For Moore, however, all of her toys seemingly have lives of their own, aside from simple nostalgia. For the memories are palpable, tangible, even burdensome – so many stories and interpretations are congealed in a single object.

Moore's paintings are carefully crafted pictorial melanges of abstract passages – both linear and painterly – text, and trompe l'oeil detail. Layering and interspersing her components skillfully on terra cotta and gold grounds, she shifts modes so seamlessly as to create a kind of compulsive and convulsive beauty. Moore's layers of image and text challenge our complacency, urging us toward a more discursive, unprogrammed and individual way of thinking. Significantly, the compelling emotional resonance of Moore's art is conveyed in large part through an evidence of hand that inflects its images and inscriptions with an equivalent grace and tact. By her own admission, Moore spent much of her childhood playing alone with toys. They transported her to another realm and served as quiet refuge from a schizophrenic brother. What is forceful about that realm in these paintings is not merely what populates it, but how it is arranged. Moore casts a wide net, and is likely to find a use for the most arcane and seemingly irrelevant zoological details, as well as art historical and botanical facts and phenomena. Works such as "Life. Still Life" combine transfers made from Xeroxes of paintings by Goya and Velazquez with frothy rendered frames and clustered arrangements of toys, creating scenes as pure as storybook fairy tales.

Not really of nature, but arrested from nature, the unabashedly romantic paintings leave the impression that Moore is consumed with a passion for the past – not necessarily as it was, but as it was painted. "Long Shadows of Divergent Species" weaves together Moore's essential repertory – the mixing of images of pain and pleasure, the merging of the confrontational and the voyeuristic, and the seamless poetic joining of word and image. Here, Moore develops incredible spatial

tensions, flattening imagery down to areas that are seemingly a millimeter deep but packed with information. Whereas a painted chart of turtle eggs holds the central area of the canvas, ghostly images of turtles float over and underneath precise renderings of toys strewn about the surface – a Pee Wee Herman doll, a Kewpie doll, an old teddy bear flopped on its stomach. All are accompanied by Moore's poignant accounts regarding their curious histories and circumstances of purchase. Beneath the entirety are collaged fragments of a 1940s biology textbook on taxonomy.

Another painting displays three tiers of monkeys. Sock monkeys are sandwiched between their stuffed cute-as-a-button versions and the expressive historical illustrations by Buffon. A thought cloud with "Darwin?" emanates from one sock monkey, thus questioning theories of evolution, in addition to tidy categories. Here, Moore returns to highly charged motifs of formal and iconic richness whereby meanings proliferate and mundane things become multivalent. She knows that beauty is the instrument that empowers us to expand our consciousness by proposing difficult subjects in exquisite formats. This is intuitive painting with full knowledge of the possibilities inherent in paint. Accordingly, Moore provides substantial pigment under rich glaze, as well as varied brushwork executed in paint thinned down to the consistency of ink or loosely applied in staccato-like strokes of umber, sepia and cream. The complicated rich hues and dynamic surface create a mood as elegiac as it is elegant, a sorrow for what has gone and enjoyment of what has not.

Moore, clearly unafraid of evoking either illustration or illumination, incorporates a grid structure into some compositions as well. In "Linnaeus?" she adheres the original Linnaeum

grid to a multitude of creatures, both scientific and manufactured. Positioned slightly off center is Bambi, who poses the naturalist's name as a question. Whirling in and out of the chalk-like grid are scientific illustrations of all sorts of creatures – mollusks, insects, snakes and fish. These are intertwined with colorful renditions of Moore's toys: tin boxer dogs, wooden "pull" ducks, elephants, rabbits, sock monkeys, her favorite horses, "Flower" the skunk, Pee Wee Herman, and "Pluck your magic twanger" Froggie. The grid functions like a screen, centering us amid the chaos. Although Moore may question our unnecessary reliance on categories, she also implies that the alternative is all out confusion. In any case, Moore's sharply detailed images, which evoke the sheen and volume of the objects themselves, catch and hold the eye, distracting it from the chaotic flow.

By blending academic influences with images from popular culture, Moore combines what is universally respected with art world outcasts. She expertly induces the push-pull yearning to be charmed by such nostalgic scenes and, at the same time, keeps us guessing about our own reactions, eventually questioning what appeals and why. All in all, Moore trusts in the things and objects she cares about, in the strange material that the sea of daily life washes up, no matter how ephemeral or elusive. The artist rewards the careful viewer by offering up a profound sense of contemplation and wonderment. Are acquired objects and exotic souvenirs more marvelous than things observed in nature? Moore shows us that one is as good as the other.

*Susie Kalil, Critical Studies,
Core Program, Glassell School of Art,
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX,
September, 1999.*



This Panel: "Line Up with Goya", 1998. Gesso, oil on linen, 20" x 20".
 Cover Panel: "Collect a Cute Dog", 1999. Gesso, oil, collage on linen, 20" x 20".
 Back Panel: "Darwin?", 1999. Oil on canvas, 40" x 32".

MARJORIE MOORE

Resides in Austin, TX.

Moore has a B.F.A. from Syracuse University, Syracuse, N.Y. and was awarded several grants and fellowships. She received a Creative Arts Program Award in paintings from the Cultural Council of Houston in 1996. Moore received an NEA Regional Fellowship in Drawings and Artists Books in 1992 and a New Forms Fellowship from the New England Foundation for the Arts in 1991. She was a McDowell Colony Artist Fellow

in 1989. Moore has exhibited in galleries and museums in Texas, Maine and Boston. Her work is in the collections of the Art Museum of South Texas, Corpus Christi, TX; Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, ME; Portland Museum of Art, ME; Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA; and several other museums.



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WOMEN & THEIR WORK

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