

TOBY TOPEK

"Ephemera"



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

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AUSTIN, TEXAS

MAKING THE PERSONAL UNIVERSAL

Toby Topek's "EPHEMERA"

The fleeting nature of experience; the call of foreign lands; the unique cultures of the Mediterranean; the natural world which surrounds us: such are the personal and subjective—yet often universal—topics addressed by Houston-based artist, Toby Topek in her current, and appropriately titled installation, "Ephemera."

Derived from the Greek *ephemeros* meaning "of or for the day" (Webster's, Second Edition), this exhibition's title not only succinctly expresses the concerns of the artist, but pays tribute to the pervasive and magical influence the Greek culture, as well as those of other foreign, often mythic ports of call, have played in Topek's life and work.

Because Topek's art is just this, ephemeral, the viewing experience as such is intrinsic to the fullest understanding of her work. Unlike a painting or sculpture, this installation itself cannot be easily described by the customary art lexicons of color, line, shape, volume, and texture. Instead, Topek's creations, as evidenced by the evocative body presented here, appear as slight and insubstantial as leaves which flutter in the wind. Nonetheless, do not let these simple works deceive you. They possess an uncanny ability to reference images from our individual and collective consciousness.

At initial glance, the nearly twenty separate pieces may appear disparate and random. However, a lyrical thread, as gossamer as one of Topek's hairs that is often present in the artist's work, runs through this exhibit. "Ephemera" continues and expands upon the themes that entered Topek's works from the mid 1980s onward, when the artist began a series of travels which expanded upon the nature-centered dialogue of earlier work, melding these concerns with a compelling interest in the foreign lands of Greece,

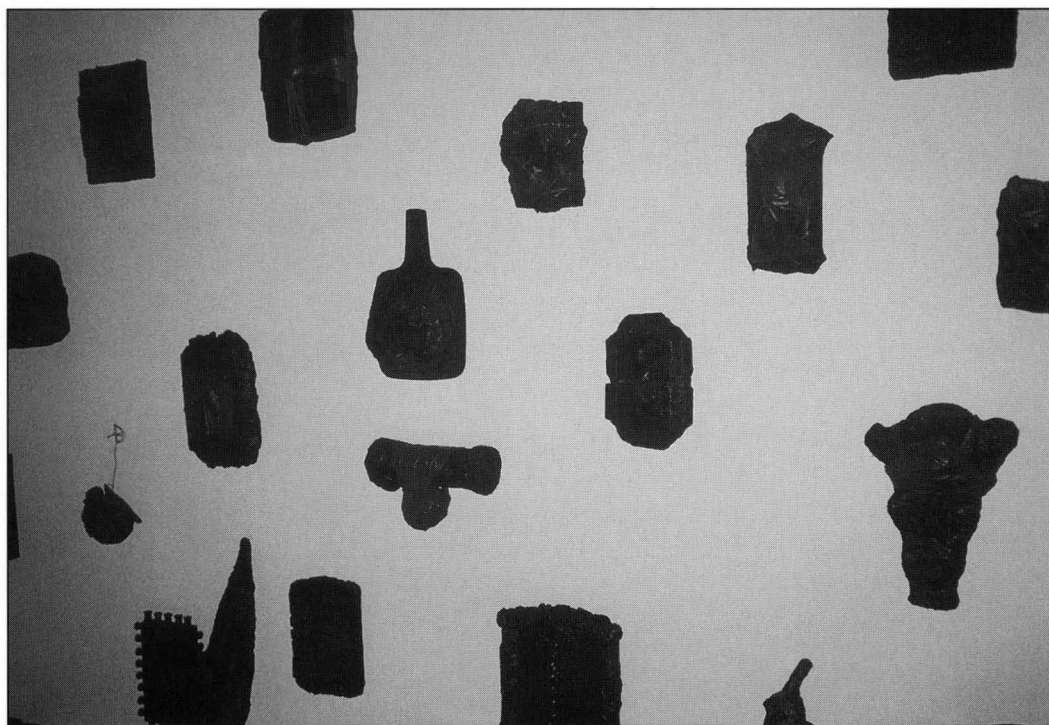
Turkey, Morocco, and Egypt. "All of my journeys are very important to me," explained Topek during one of a series of studio visits where I witnessed the metamorphosis of her installations for "Ephemera" into their final form. Repeatedly, Topek referenced her love for one of the cradles of Western civilization—Greece. "My heart is for Greece... above and beyond...it is there that I rediscovered myself...it's the beginning of a healing experience for me, particularly after my fire." (Right before her 1986 trip to Greece, Topek's studio caught fire. Rather than lament the loss, she went on her trip as scheduled.)

Besides Greece, Topek also expresses a deep connection towards the Middle Eastern countries of Turkey, Morocco, and Egypt. A pivotal experience in her life was her 1987 visit to the semi-nomadic tent people of the steppes of Turkey, where Topek shared meals with local inhabitants. She dined in their felt clad tented homes, known as "topac evs." Topek often remarks upon this strange and mystical connection with her own last name which is similar despite the fact that she was

born thousand of miles away (in Brooklyn) and grew up in Houston, Texas.

Morocco's influence seems to exist in the wrappings and covering which characterize many of Topek's creations. The artist collects native costumes from her sojourns, and often portrays herself bound in Turkish and Moroccan garb, as evidenced in photographs included in the work entitled *Folded Drawings*. Topek repeats this process of wrapping in such works as *Hidden Objects*, and *Foreign Objects*. In *Hidden Objects*, the mysterious and almost threatening, black wrapped and layered objects assume primitive fetish qualities that are juxtaposed against the white shrouded elements of *Foreign Objects* which possess a more luminous light-soaked presence.

Another commonality present in all of Topek's work, and strongly evident in "Ephemera", is an interest in uncommon materials. These include not just imagery from the natural world, but materials from nature herself. Topek's remarkable palette contains



"Hidden Objects", 1995 - 1998, Mixed media with natural materials, Dimensions variable.

spices from the Middle East, water collected from the Earth's great seas and rivers, sand from the major oceans of the world, strands of her own hair, assorted minerals, and an array of flora from the familiar (figus, magnolia, pine cones) to that from Greece (olive leaves, cork). These are augmented by pedestrian materials such as bed sheets, telephone pole insulators, and jig saw puzzle pieces. In Topek's hands, these disparate and seemingly unrelated elements become transformed and transfigured into the base materials of memory and experience.

The image selected for her exhibition announcement, "Passage", provides a compelling point of departure for Topek's spiritual journey. A magnolia leaf that has been dried and painstakingly preserved is embellished with small drawings of eyes that peer at the viewer in a ritualistic manner. Some eyes are strongly inked, while others appear to fade off the fragile surface of the leaf. We quickly recognize one of the pervasive symbols of the Mediterranean cultures, which can be traced back to ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic writings found in the tombs: "the eye that protects you against evil spirits."

Leaves also are prominent in three other pivotal pieces. The most ephemeral are Topek's use of olive leaves in *Catharsis*, comprised of the fragile olive leaves gathered from her Grecian travels. The leaves are embedded within paper that has been cut into leaf shapes which are in turn overlaid with casein and gesso before being attached to the wall. *Catharsis* creates the sense of leaves whispering through a grove. In *Armchair Traveler*, magnolia and ficus leaves, once again anchored to the wall, appear as balloons or undersea jellyfish, floating or soaring in their respective media, only held down by looping strings which themselves suggest some arcane hand-writing. A third nature-centered piece is *Practicing Greek*. This installation features a hand-lettered Greek poem by the early 20th century poet, Anestis Evangelou, which is calligraphed onto a necklace of ficus leaves. *Practicing Greek*

offers a potent testament to Topek's intense love of poetry in general and the Greek language in particular.

Often Topek manifests an almost 19th century concern with cataloguing and quantifying the natural and man-made creations of the world. In the piece *Wonder of Wonders*, the artist puns on the concept of "The Seven Wonders of The Ancient World" by overlaying lists of: The Seven Mysterious Sites, The Seven Modern Marvels, The Seven Natural Wonders, The Seven American Wonders, and The Seven Texas Wonders onto a group of photos of Michelangelo's "David". In *Wonder of Wonders*, several of the photos are turned into jigsaw puzzles with others left uncut; some are covered with the Topek's meticulous hand-writing which lists in encyclopedic detail places that capture our imagination.

Also comprised of innumerable jigsaw pieces made from a 1984 snapshot of a classical Greek temple (Sounion outside of Athens), *Take a Souvenir* addresses our perception of memory. Some of the puzzle pieces are alternately organized in groups bound with rubber bands while others rest loosely in an archival cardboard box. Blown up many times the size of the artist's original travel snapshot, *Take a Souvenir* asks us to reassemble its myriad pieces and thus relive the artist's experience on a sunlit and cloudless day outside of Athens in the mid 1980s.

One of the most powerful works of the exhibition, *Euphoria*, takes as its point of departure a previous work, *The Longest Rivers* which was originally shown at the Lawndale Art & Performance Center in Houston. *Euphoria* offers a fascinating collection of over 100 bottles filled with water colored in intense shades of Aegean blue. "These pretty colors lure you and entice you to pay attention," notes Topek, who believes the viewer will be surprised but ultimately enlightened by the built-up layers of her bottles' incongruous contents, which include images of a starving

child, headlines recording political atrocities, or bits of floating fungus which hover in the blue of the vessels' waters.

Several small scale installations evidence extraordinary detail and Topek's ritualistic process of art making, thus further leading us on the journey begun by *Euphoria*. *Tent Cards*, *Trademark*, and *Remapping the World* continue this interweaving of nature and culture evidenced throughout "Ephemera". *Remapping the World*, the most complex of this series explores issues of consumer culture and myth. Incorporating advertising images of grapes, a dramatic view of a Turkish tent, an evocative drawing of the artist in traditional Turkish attire, a delicate leaf traced with a floor plan, and a re drawn view of the West Bank executed in vividly stained pomegranate juice. *Trademark*, with its unique amalgamation of spices, advertising illustrations, and plastic specimen dishes presents a visceral experience of foreign travel.

With "Ephemera" Topek takes us on her personal journey, which ultimately translates into the universal voyage of every individual. No one seeing the leaves, minerals, bottled waters, or provocatively layered objects encapsulated here can help but recall a special place that has indelibly lodged in their memory. "I want to capture some of the magical properties of other cultures. Thereby I offer vignettes of the rich worlds and places out there. This is a way for us to hold onto the wonderful things...the fleeting experiences in life...that are so hard to keep in our memories. They seem just to rise up in smoke. Here today, gone tomorrow. Ephemeral."

Catherine D. Anspion
Houston, Texas
April, 1998

TOBY TOPEK

BORN: BROOKLYN, NEW YORK
LIVES: HOUSTON, TEXAS

EDUCATION

Houston Museum of Fine Arts,
Feather & Feather, University of Houston

Lived, worked, travelled, and studied in Greece,
Turkey, Germany, Morocco, Egypt, and Italy.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1998 "Ephemera," Women & Their Work,
Austin, TX
- 1994 "The Texture of Memory," Lanning
Gallery, Houston, TX
- 1993 "Foreign Objects," Lanning Gallery,
Houston, TX
- 1992 "Remedies," Lanning Gallery,
Houston, TX
- 1991 "Natural Journeys," Lanning Gallery,
Houston, TX
"Reign of Pollen," Judy Youens Gallery,
Houston, TX
- 1988 "Spirit of Place," Judy Youens Gallery,
Houston, TX
- 1986 Paintings and sculpture, Judy Youens
Perception Gallery, Houston, TX
- 1982 Drawings and sculpture, Graham
Gallery, Houston, TX
- 1981 "From a Silent Garden," 40 Walls
Gallery, Houston, TX
- 1978 Collage and Sculpture, Roberto Molina
Gallery, Houston, TX

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1997 "The Big Show," Lawndale Art and
Performance Center,
Houston, TX; Juror: Don Bacigalupi
"A Portable Stained-Glass Window,"
outdoor sculpture, The Artfull Garden,
Houston, TX
"Blossom Tree," Blossom Street
Gallery and Sculpture Garden,
Houston, TX
- 1996 "Houston Area Exhibition," Blaffer
Gallery, Houston, TX
"Snapshot," DiverseWorks, Houston, TX
"Texas Art for Russia, Russian Art for
Texas," Art League, Houston, TX
- 1995 "Guerrero Viejo: Asi Es," Mexic-Arte
Museum, Austin, TX
"Culture, Water, Money: The Passion
of the Frontier," symposium, River
Pierce Foundation, San Ignacio, TX
"Texas Art for Russia" - Exhibition
Tour: Yekaterinburg, Tomsk,
St. Petersburg, Rostov-on-don,
Moscow/down Nizhny-novgorod
Moscow, Russia
- 1994 "The Box," Hooks-Epstein Gallery,
Houston, TX
"Minatures," Hooks-Epstein Gallery,
Houston, TX
"Out of This World," Contemporary
Arts Museum, Houston, TX
- 1993 The Texas Triennial "Texas Between
Two Worlds," Contemporary Arts
Museum, Houston, TX, Modern Art
Museum, Fort Worth, TX, Art Museum

1992



*"Euphoria", 1996 - 1998, Collected containers, images, objects, language,
natural materials, dye, water, oil, Dimensions variable.*

of South Texas, Corpus Christi, TX.
Catalogue/Video
"Alchemy House," Collaboration with
Dan Havel, Houston, TX
"Souvenirs," Three Artists, Lawndale
Art and Performance
Center, Houston, TX; Curated by Mary
Ross Taylor
"The Garden of Eden," Lanning
Gallery, Houston, TX
"Sonicworks, Extending the
Instrumental Performance,"
DiverseWorks and Commerce Street
Artists Warehouse, Houston, TX
The Case for Art, "The Art of Healing,"
Lawndale Art and Performance at
Houston Public Library, Houston, TX
"New American Talent," Laguna Gloria
Art Museum, Austin, TX; Juror:
Madeleine Grynsztejn. Catalogue
"The Improvisational Spirit," Transco
Gallery, Houston, TX
"The Big Show," Lawndale Art and
Performance Center, Houston, TX;

Juror: Annegreth Nill
"Slouching Toward 2000." The
Politics of Gender, Women &
Their Work, Austin, TX; Juror: Lucy
Lippard
1991 "The War Show," Lanning Gallery,
Houston, TX
1989 "A Century of Sculpture in Texas,"
Huntington Art Gallery, University of
Texas, Austin, TX; Co-Curators: Becky
Duval Reese and Patricia Hendricks.
Catalogue

COLLECTIONS

Bank of Houston, Houston, TX
Wilson Industries, Houston, TX
Transco Energy, Houston, TX
Shell Oil, Houston, TX
Texas Research Institute of Mental Science,
Houston, TX
Lighthouse for the Blind, Houston, TX
Private Collections: U.S., Mexico, Greece, Turkey



Cover Image: "Practicing Greek" (1995 Version), Ficus leaves, ink, approx. 16" x 12"

Inside Flap: "Take a Souvenir" (1997 Version), Snapshots, jigsaw puzzles, rubber-bands, archival box, 17" x 21" x 17"

Back Image: "Trademark", 1998, Plastic, petri dishes, spices, illustrations, glue, ink, 20 dishes, each dish 3.5" x 3.5" x .5"

ARTIST STATEMENT

Like the archaeologist I have searched for clues; the link between cultures, the connective tissue, the spirit of place. Collecting the fragments, studying the fragments, I attempt to put back together a new order. I look to the past and the natural world for human spiritual survival.

My mind assembles and reassembles materials to create memory from a wealth of particulars; memory is a process, not a permanent record. Memories change as pieces are reviewed and reassembled over time. I save/assemble/dismantle materials, rework pieces over the years. The importance of remembering and coming to terms with change is in all of my work.

Investigating the act of seeing by engaging with particular places— sometimes my own back yard, but often outside the United States, through visiting other countries, I have deepened my capacity to connect with different people and the places they occupy. I have stayed amongst the people absorbing their rhythms and celebrating their rituals. Samplings, snapshots and observations become materials for work that addresses themes of mutability, of geopolitical perspective, and of individual awareness. I'm interested in the contrast between contemporary consumer culture and the layered history of ancient temples and oceans. The passage of time, the process of changing places, and the ongoingness of personal history are preserved in my work.

Toby Topek, 1998.



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Now celebrating its 20th anniversary, Women & Their Work presents over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, literature, and film. The gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented 1496 artists in 169 visual art exhibitions, 81 music, dance, and theater events, 19 literary readings, 12 film festivals, and 118 workshops, in programming that reflects the ethnic and cultural diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in Art in America, ArtForum and National Public Radio and was the first organization in Texas to receive a grant in visual art from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Women & Their Work reaches over 5,000 school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.



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