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whitehot | November 2007, **Obsession: Art and Artifacts from Sonoma County Private Collections, at the Sonoma County Museum**



Obsession, Exhibition Installation by Lewis deSoto, Sonoma County Museum of Art, Santa Rosa, CA, 2007. View of machina section of the exhibit. Artifacts, exhibition design, carpet, wood, lighting and printed educational materials.

Obsession: Art and Artifacts from Sonoma County Private Collections, at the Sonoma County Museum, should be considered a collaborative and intellectual montage, an original installation art project constructed by Bay Area artist Lewis deSoto by assembling, juxtaposing and subsuming various elements culled from private collections.

The presentation of objects is intentionally eclectic and features objects as diverse as Abraham Lincoln's hair; a light-box installation by contemporary artist Alfredo Jaar; original sixteenth-century maps of Japan; nineteenth-century papier-mâché plant studies; photographs by Ann Hamilton and Ansel Adams; and Native American ivory walrus carvings, Civil War artifacts, taxidermy birds, military uniforms, hood ornaments, Native American basketry, antique toys, firearms, and tools.

The first show of its kind to be presented by the Sonoma County Museum, the exhibition features more than thirty significant works from the private collections of Jack Blades, Paul Hill, Cindy Daniel and Doug Lipton, Ann Hatch, Steven and Nancy Oliver, Craig Rosser, Guy Smith, Henry Wendt, Frank and Kay Woods, Ron Casentini, Wally Lowry, John deMarchi, Jim Kidder, Daniel Murley, Pam and Bob Stone.

The initial stage of the installation began with the curatorial process of selecting collectors to participate in the exhibition by Sonoma County Museum curatorial staff, including Chief Curator Patricia Watts, Historical Collections Curator Eric Stanley, and independent curator Gay Dawson.

Artist Lewis deSoto was then invited to select objects from the collections that would then serve as the constituent elements for the installation.

Obsession's stated premise is that the impulse to collect is an endeavor to impose order, as well as "to elicit greater meaning and truth from the material world." However, by displacing and reformulating the significance of objects on display from their places of origin and function, and by juxtaposing and grouping and (re)presenting them thematically as animals, plants, minerals, humanity, and machines, in close spatial proximity, the exhibition perhaps unconsciously problematizes and undermines the very classificatory systems it aims to consider, and thereby convolutes the objects' historical natures and symbolic functions through the associative free play of meanings triggered by the re-contextualization of the various pieces on view.

The presentation of art and "ethnographic" artifacts to address the difficult issues of why and how collectors' collections function privately and socially, serves here to connect disparate economic, social and cultural histories through the politics of exhibition display.

The point of departure for the exhibition is the shifting nature of trans-historical cultural artifacts, and the possibility for multiple interpretations, based in questioning the myth that there is an objective value-free or "scientific" view of history and aesthetics, a view that has been used to authorize, legitimize, inform, and condition what has often expressed an exclusionist eurocentric view of art and culture.

The exhibition recognizes and indirectly alludes to the construction of classificatory distinctions between terms like "art" and "ethnography" and how they function as categories that have shaped perceptions of cultural "difference" and modes of exhibition display that have been instrumental in re-enforcing hierarchical values between objects and cultures.

In this context, the exhibition's conflation of cultural artifacts self-reflexively comments on the complex dialectics between institutions, collectors, artists and audiences—each having diverse and often contestational needs and agendas — and by extension, a history of European recognition of cultural differences, which was reflected in the forerunners of museums—the Renaissance *wunderkammer* ("wonder rooms") and *kunstkammer* ("art rooms"), which were created as separate environments for the examination of rare, precious, and "exotic" objects.

While this history of collecting cultural objects was integrally connected to the creation of a new world order that defined non-European cultures and objects as fundamentally different from those of the European's history, it is not directly addressed in the exhibition, although it is discernable in the way the exhibition manipulates of modes of museological display that have traditionally differentiated and segregated various objects.

According to deSoto, the conflation of objects formed a means of constituting a dialogue between the objects and "this creates an artistic and coherent way to unify the collections... Even though all these collections come from disparate sources and a variety of people, there are ways in which we can find connection and association between them that speaks to the deeper way we think about the world."

In the installation, the (re)presented objects can be read as metaphorically alluding to institutional practices of secularizing objects and removing others from their original contexts, used here to promote a leveling process in which all objects selected for display are largely assimilated in the same way through a largely visual presentation.

This aesthetic recontextualization of objects within unitary museum display — which can hinder the recovery of their "original" functional identity and meaning — here serves to make apparent that museological ordering principles such as art, ethnography, nationality, and chronology are implicated in the creation of an illusion of "truth" and order that is logical and inherent, when rather they should be perhaps considered superimposed and arbitrary.

A critical issue that the exhibition establishes is that the various artifacts are ambiguously bound to their cultural contexts, and additionally, that when subsumed as objects/texts in a "linguistic" or semiotic museological display, which determines the circulation and evaluation in a cultural circuit of meaning, they are based in and conditioned by a legacy of cultural interests that develops affinities that cut across chronological boundaries and conventional taxonomies.

In its mode of presentation, which is aimed at eschewing museological systems of meaning in favor of a polysemic and multilayered vision, Obsession is nevertheless conditioned by and tied to the same discourses on which it intends to comment.

Indeed, while the exhibition is clearly concerned with reflecting on inherited ideologies and curatorial discourses, it nevertheless partakes of structures that condition how these objects are allowed to "speak" within its "linguistic" structure: the spectacle of museum display that proscribes the conditions and modes of their constructed meaning.

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whitehot gallery images, click a thumbnail.



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