

CABINETS OF CURIOSITIES FOUR ARTISTS, FOUR VISIONS

This exhibition, *Cabinets of Curiosities: Four Artists, Four Visions*, is based on two principal influences. The first and most fundamental is the human desire to collect. Grounded in curiosity, the collecting sensibility affects almost all of us. We've all collected something at sometime in our lives, from tee shirts to matchbook covers, stamps to antique automobiles. We are curious and want to know more about something, so we acquire various examples and variations of whatever it is we collect so that we may have them near us, so that we might examine them more closely.

The idea of collecting, while widely shared and accepted, is also emotional and highly personal. It is particularly so among artists, who see the treasures in their collections from the point of view of one who also makes objects. Thus these things from other times, other hands, or other cultures have a particularly strong influence upon the makers of works of art. Many artists, past and present, have collected materials beyond their own creation, and it is their shared interest in collecting and the influences of collecting on their art that brought these four artists together. Some use objects they have collected in their works, others use them as a powerful influence on their work.

The second influence in this exhibition is more historical. In the post-Renaissance Europe of the sixteenth century (and continuing into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries), individuals came to examine the world around them in new ways, marveling at the wonders of nature and the cunning creations of humanity. They sought to find the order underlying the rich chaos of nature and assembled large groups of preserved plants, animals, or minerals for closer examination. Such collections were treasured and often assembled in special places called *cabinets of curiosities*, which might range from a few shelves in a cabinet to a magnificent suite of rooms, filled with beautiful cases. It was the ordering and organizing of such collections that created the beginnings of modern taxonomy. In so doing, these collectors also planted the seeds for what would later become great public museums of natural history, art, and technology.

The four artists in this exhibition have each created a *cabinet of curiosities* based on a personal logic. Many of the objects within these structures or on the gallery walls have been made by the artists or taken from their collections. These cabinets have also been immeasurably enriched by drawing upon the materials assembled for teaching and research from various departments of the University of Wisconsin–Madison. In her introduction to the catalogue, exhibition organizer Natasha Nicholson speaks of the artists' cabinets as being at the innermost point of a set of concentric rings: cabinets within cabinets within cabinets. The artists' cabinets are located in an art museum, itself the outgrowth of the historical cabinet of curiosities, and within a great university, whose wonders and riches form a glorious cabinet in itself. This exhibition thus celebrates the collecting and ordering impulses on a far wider scale than that of four individuals.

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The participating artists wish to acknowledge the following agencies and departments of the University of Wisconsin–Madison for their support of this project and exhibition. The Department of Special Collections at Memorial Library, Zoological Museum, Middleton Health Sciences Library, Gallery of Design in the School of Human Ecology, the Herbarium of the Department of Botany, and the Departments of Physics, History of Medicine, Art, Art History, Entomology, Astronomy, History of Science, Geography, and East Asian Languages.

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