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Special Collections

OUT OF THE ORDINARY

date	artists
24th April to 25th August 2006	Hazel Jones Sharon Blakey
Mon ... Fri 10am ... 4pm	



stephanie boydell *Out of the Ordinary*

Museums collect to educate and inform, and to preserve the 'important achievements' of the past and present for future generations. This exhibition is intended to bring to light the ways in which artists work with collections to find inspiration and information for their own work. Its aim is to show how historic collections, in particular mmu's Special Collections, are alive, evolving and relevant to the contemporary user. The artists' remit was to identify and use objects found in the museum's stores to produce new work that would demonstrate this and reveal their working processes.

It was expected that the items chosen by Sharon and Hazel would fit a conventional template of what was of historical or aesthetic merit. However, as their trawl through the stores progressed, it became clear that what drew them to an object was not what would necessarily draw the curator or historian.

Their fascination lay in those things that were not 'treasured': unused and broken frames, old labels, the vestigial recordings of a museum object's life. These things are not part of the collections as such and yet are not discarded; they are objects that museums dare not throw away because we understand that they may have significance in the future. This exercise has allowed another, alternative, value to be recognised.

Accession or identification numbers written in a tight manuscript hand on the bottom of a pot and old index cards, long since obsolete since the introduction of electronic catalogues, are often seen as only adding value and identity to another object. Once removed from that associated object, they are seen to have no intrinsic worth of their own. To Sharon and Hazel though, these were items of great mystery and beauty in themselves. Everything in the store was a potential artefact, everything had significance.

This same attitude is revealed by the rationale which drives their own collecting. The remnants of past lives and behaviours made evident by the scuff marks and scratches of use are of more import than the item itself. These personal collections have been displayed alongside new work and the existing collections. Placing all these items in a museum setting, in cases, with labels, has enabled the viewer to focus their attention on the smallest detail, to see the tell-tale scars which document the object's story and to understand what it is that has captivated the artists.

This project was designed to challenge the 'conventional' use of collections, but in the process it has challenged the very concept of collections and how the act of collecting and exhibiting in an institution defines the canon. This projection of value onto the mundane and familiar ultimately makes one question the validity of what goes on in the museum, of who it is that decides that an item's appearance or apparent historical merit has any worth at all.

sharon and hazel's acknowledgements

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Hazel thanks Michael Leigh and Archie for their support.



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hazel jones studied at Crewe and Alsager College of Higher Education 1981 – 84, ba (Combined Studies) in Craft. After a year out at the Jolliffe Studio in Swindon she went to the Royal College of Art, 1985 – 87, to do an MA in Silversmithing and Jewellery.

She has exhibited nationally and internationally at a number of galleries including Royal Festival Hall, London; Walsall Art Gallery; Ikon Gallery, Birmingham and the Kunstbanken, Hamar, Norway.

She now teaches full time on the Interactive Arts course at Manchester Metropolitan University.



sharon blakey studied at Wolverhampton Polytechnic and North Staffordshire Polytechnic. She has exhibited at a number of galleries including The Harley Gallery, Rufford Craft Centre and Contemporary Ceramics in London.

She teaches on the Three Dimensional Design Programme at Manchester Metropolitan University. Sharon has also delivered craft workshops in schools and is currently involved in the development of The Centre for Engagement through Art and Design at Manchester Metropolitan University.

hazel jones



This exhibition has allowed me to search for and identify my lost inspiration. I realise now that it had never disappeared, but it had become so familiar that I had become unaware of its impact on my work. My inspiration comes from many places, but I think it is dominated by two themes:

— one —

My work always begins with something small and insignificant; a piece of fluff, a lump of gravel or a tea leaf. Ideas are generated by my efforts to elevate these forgotten trivia into objects of art that should be treasured.

The catalyst for this exhibition is a cardboard box I found that had 'String too small for use' written in best hand-writing on the top. It was full of tiny off-cuts of thread and string which had been collected by someone who must have felt that even though they were too small for use, someday the bits of string might be useful.

— two —

I have been collecting strange metal objects from car boot sales, charity shops and junk markets since I was a student in the 1980's. It wasn't until July 2004 I began to 'catalogue' this collection on a Weblog, www.a1scrapmetal.blogspot.com.

In the process of gathering these objects together and itemising them, I started to see what it was that drew me to them. They had common features such as stamped marks which gave information about where an item was made, a patent number, manufacturer, date, measurements, serial number, etc; the colouring of the metals and the scratch marks made by years of use. All of which told a story, illuminating a hidden history that brought the object to life.

Many of the objects have specific uses such as string cutting or pot mending; uses which have become obsolete. Our perception of such objects has changed as their use becomes lost, and what was once mundane begins to take on an air of intrigue and mystery.

sharon blakey



Like many people I collect things. For many years I did not think there was any particular reason why I collected the things that I did, mainly they were junk shop finds or things retrieved from skips or found on the ground whilst going about my daily business. Old oil cans, brushes, tins, utensils, the kind of stuff people throw away during a spring clean. Then I came across my late father's razor.

It was amongst personal things like letters and family photographs. It was a Rolls razor, still in its box and in pristine condition. To my eyes it was certainly a lovely thing with its slightly faded turquoise and orange packaging and its dated graphics. But I am sure my father would not have appreciated that. As I opened it I could see that all the original information leaflets were still intact, the instructions for use including a list of do's and don'ts and a note to the salesman on how to demonstrate the product to the customer. Opening each revealed a little bit more and my enjoyment grew. I noticed a date of 1956 and a quick calculation told me that my father would have been eighteen years old. I was immediately struck by the significance of this ordinary object. This was not just a razor, this was a symbol of coming of age, a cherished gift perhaps from parent to child, certainly something important enough to keep all of these years.

And that is the thing about objects, they carry with them a poignancy and value over and above their intended purpose. And through my father's razor I have come to realise that this is the essence of my passion for the rather mundane things I collect.

This body of work commemorates the ordinary. Those everyday things we take for granted that become part of the fabric of our lives remaining long after we are gone, the archaeological finds of the future.

... extract from 'My Father's Razor' prize-winning entry in the *Interpreting Ceramics 'Speak for Yourself'* competition (see www.interpretingceramics.com).

