

CONTAINERS
OF MEMORY

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PARTICIPATING ARTISTS

Pamela Bannos

Cynthia Morgan

Lisa Olson

Esther Parada

Marianetta Porter

Celeste Scopelites

Carole Zak

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There are even children, and I have met some of them, who want to know...why we remember the past and not the future.¹

The changing role of the found, appropriated or recycled object has been integral to significant developments in modern and contemporary art. Early twentieth-century artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Kurt Schwitters broke the previous rules of art making by incorporating everyday objects and discarded materials within their work. Their bold rejections of past conventions expanded the material sources for art as well as the boundaries and definition of what art could be. As we near the close of the twentieth century, a number of influential artists incorporate and reinterpret artifacts--physical referents to the past--to examine how they have been used in the construction of history and identity. Contemporary artists such as Christian Boltanski, Doris Salcedo and Fred Wilson reflect on our complex relationship to the vestiges of human experience, drawing our attention to the fragility of memory and mutability of history. This exhibition showcases seven North American artists whose work explores the nature of memory by considering the meaning and significance we attach to objects and images from personal, cultural or historical perspectives.

In his essay, "My House," Primo Levi described the seventeenth-century technique for developing memory skills whereby one associates certain mental concepts with the interior spaces of a familiar or invented building. However, in imagining himself using the cherished spaces of his Turin home as part of such a mnemonic system, he confesses,

...it would not work in my case because in my memory all the corners of my house are occupied, and authentic memories would interfere with the chance, fictitious ones demanded by this technique.²

With the tenderness of recalling an old friend, Levi goes on to describe his intimate relationship with the familiar rooms, furniture and other domestic objects of the house, revealing the multiple layers of memories accumulated in the home in which he had lived for most of his life.

Levi's personal tale reflects on the intricate relationship between the inner and physical worlds, experience and environment, memories and possessions. In an age now characterized by speed and rapidly changing technological

advancements, the material world is characterized more by mass consumption—the immediate replacement of the recent past with the new and improved—than as a source for personal mnemonic devices. Yet within a throwaway culture, we continue to identify ourselves with and invest our memories in certain possessions.

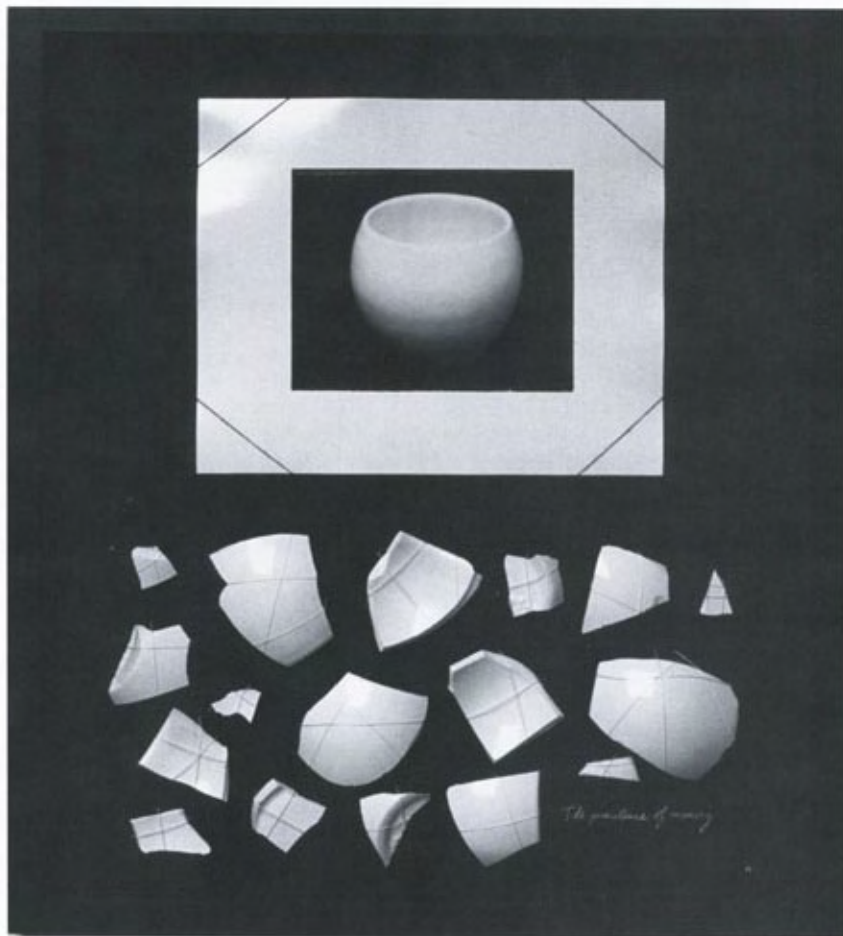
On another level, we unearth the experiences and beliefs of past peoples and cultures through the retrieval and study of artifacts. Surviving the ravages of age and use, artifacts—the residue of material culture and human handiwork—have the potential to act as witness and serve as evidence of an otherwise forgotten culture or history. Although fragmented and displaced, these relics endure long after the individual who produced them, and give a voice to silenced lives and eras.

Time and space are re-configured through the process of remembering and forgetting. Memories can be filtered through the lens of contemporary experience, and present experience can be shaped by memories of past events. And yet the human mind is capable of recalling events that never happened and forgetting those that have shaped our histories and identities.

We collect mementos and souvenirs as guides to our memories. Our ownership of them serves as a physical reference that bestows authenticity to a distant time or place. However, more often than not, once we have selected an item as such a reminder, we put it away in a drawer or closet, rarely taking it out to view. Susan Stewart discusses this particular abandonment and "material worthlessness" of the souvenir in *On Longing*, her insightful analysis of the relationship between everyday objects and human experience. Noting that it is often stored in the attic or cellar, places situated away from everyday activities, she observes, "the souvenir is destined to be forgotten."³

Artist **Celeste Scopelites** meticulously wraps the exteriors of small and precious boxes filled with the unseen ashes of burned writings or encases a stone with yards of cotton webbing as if to protect them, mark them, keep them in place. However, placed on top of a tenuously narrow table or the shelves of a tall, spindly hutch these enwrapped objects explore the delicate balance between presence and the absence, remembering and forgetting.

We collect objects and images as articles of proof—as if in an act of resistance to oblivion, and in an effort to remember that which we fear will be forgotten. By attaching meaning and significance to such possessions, we make connections between distant time and space, connecting the material with the immaterial, and inner world of human experience.



The Persistence of Memory, 1996



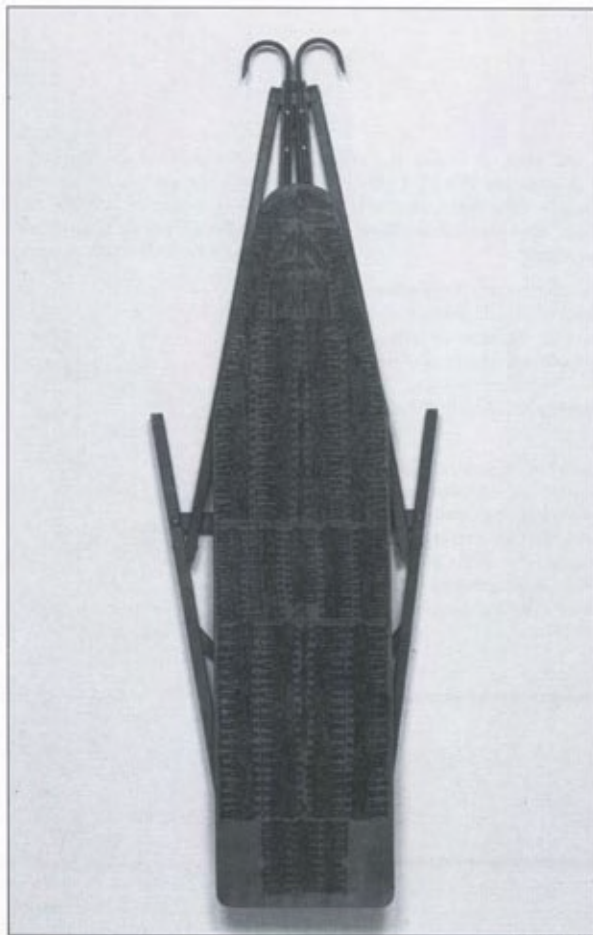
Vanilla Geyser, 1998-99
photo credit: Peter Lee, Courtesy
of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts



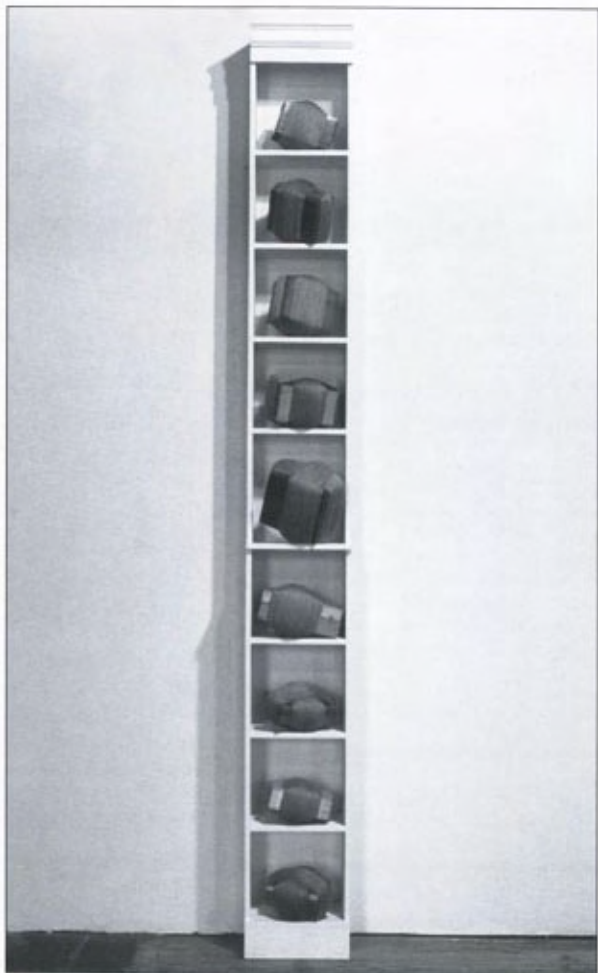
detail from *Slip*, 1998-99



detail from *A Thousand Centuries*, Panel 3, 1992



Slaver, 1997



Memento 2, 1998



Dress, 1998