

MEMORIES AND ARCHIVES

BY LILLIAN ALLEN

A line

A curve

A shape

A form

Symbols

A circle unbroken

Art sometimes asks not just what we remember but what we remember to remember. Writers write stories. Poets like me evoke images and emotions with words and sounds. Dancers use the body in motion like brush strokes. But, an artist through a gesture can return us to our memory landscape, to ponder specificities of individual histories and contemplate our lives as aspects of the human journey.

In this series of work, *Memories and Archives*, Aaron Mitchell returns us individually into ourselves, and collectively to our histories. The viewer is given the opportunity to meditate on some simple elements of everyday life; a baby's rattle, a knife, a fork, an old shaving knife, an ironing board, a bicycle, and books, now elevated in our consciousness by the artist's attention. In Mitchell's creative landscape, these otherwise unremarkable objects now stand as "traditional" or "ceremonial" pieces, challenging the viewer to rethink their relationship to them. We are compelled to explore the layered and nuanced dimensionality of each object as it stands dressed and poised, commanding our attention. These objects become symbols, or doors, that the artist hopes will return us collectively to our inner-selves, to a connection to each other, and to our built environment of human culture. Most importantly however, *Memories and Archives* returns us to ritual; our human act of purposefulness.

Mitchell's art explores relocation/dislocation as he navigates new landscapes, rescuing and preserving his personal history, weaving his own strands into the tapestry of human history. He threads his life and his art with this continuous thread, weaving his bits of the Canadian imagination into Iceland's cultural terrain, a community in which he is at home as both family and foreigner. At the same time,

Mitchell has transformed aspects of the Canadian story, now being (re)created by his experience of the Icelandic cultural and physical landscapes. Mitchell is a part of the texture, history, and culture of both countries and his art reminds us, that not only do we walk in the footsteps of others, but we also walk with others. In relation to Mitchell's wrapped objects we are not isolated individuals, we are part of the human experience, sourced by collective roots.

Aaron Mitchell's act of painstakingly wrapping his objects makes us experience the objects, not as we would encounter them in everyday life, but as companions on one's life journey. The objects invite us to experience and recognize their value in our lives. With Mitchell's art, things of value are bound in these objects. His imagination hones in on things we depend on. Each object is carefully selected for the memories they hold for us and the roles they have played in our lives. In transforming these objects, Mitchell has succeeded in preserving the essence of each piece.

Memories and Archives is an installation that hovers between *Still Life* and *Sculpture*. Mitchell's act of wrapping removes all original traces of color, wood, metal, or paint. They have been dubbed out so that we can each dub in our own history, our own story. This is what the artist intends for us; an entering that will flood our imagination, like Mitchell's own experience of growing up with a house overflowing with books. Opening book after book and entering them like a door. Books that have wrapped up within them different worlds—present worlds, past worlds, future worlds and worlds that evoked other worlds. To enter each object like a door.

As we view Mitchell's objects, they perform for us. Dressed and poised under back lights and soft spotlights, they receive our focused attention. We suspect that something sacred has transpired. We fixate our gaze and are pulled into the territory of personal longing, and that of individual and collective memory.

The starkness and rawness of the white unbleached painter's canvas used to wrap the objects, creates a new

landscape, and becomes the canvas on which, once entered, we project or retrieve our memories, and interconnections. Mitchell's act of binding a soft texture to the hard surface of the objects makes them tactile and vulnerable, able to receive a human act of tenderness. Something hard and defined is now made malleable and penetrable.

As Mitchell carefully and painstakingly follows the curve of these otherwise ordinary, if not sometimes banal objects, he returns us to ritual; attention and purposefulness in everyday life. His treatment of wrapping draws out the purity of form in these objects and focuses our eyes to near abstraction on the angularity of shapes, lines, and form. One cannot escape the reference to mummification or the metaphor of binding. It is through this reference that we recognize that something of import is before us and something has been/deserves to be preserved.

A sterile bandaging effect is created by Mitchell's process of wrapping and we realize that it is through the artist's hand, by the artist's 'tender stitches' that these objects are rescued and renewed. We experience a profound silence because we know that something precious is being repaired and returned to us. Our impulse is not to jump on the pieces or bounce them around but to encounter them with a sense of great care as a kind of meditation. Mitchell's installation invites us to contemplate the inner workings of objects, and of selves, objectified.

The act of wrapping is also a gesture that creates the magic of a gift. A giving of thanks. In Mitchell's installation it is a way to both receive and pay tribute. Human existence is filled with passages. We create rituals to honor and rituals for entrances and exits and rituals to mark change. We say goodbye to our loved ones, but the objects we use daily that are so much a part of our lives, and so much a part of who we are, are for the most part, discarded without honor. Their significance or their relationship in our lives unacknowledged and unmarked.

To engage Mitchell's art, the viewer must unbind his or her own memory and mummified state of subconscious, to reflect and dialogue with the spirit of Mitchell's objects and with the multidimensionality of our relationship to the objects. In this

process of unbinding our memories, individual viewing is transformed into a social process because we are bound together in our recognition of common experiences, common roots.

Mitchell's installation, orchestrated as it is in the museum space with its starkness, nuances of breath, silence, deliberate spacing and special lighting effectively reinforces a reflective tempo of memory and meditation. As part of the installation, Mitchell has created technical drawings of each of the objects in their original state and colors, as we are accustomed to them in everyday usage. This further complicates our experience of the objects. These drawings are positioned as scientific documents and an architectural reference in the field of built culture as a contrast to the possibilities of human emotion.

If, as the artist says, his work poses questions as to our place, time, mortality and personal importance, these questions can only become more poignant when we realize what Mitchell's work suggests; that these objects will one day represent our history and our spirit to future generations.

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Symbols

A circle of human culture
expanded but unbroken.

AARON MITCHELL

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