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Lyndal Osborne
Selections from the Poetic Structure ofthe World

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See table of contents

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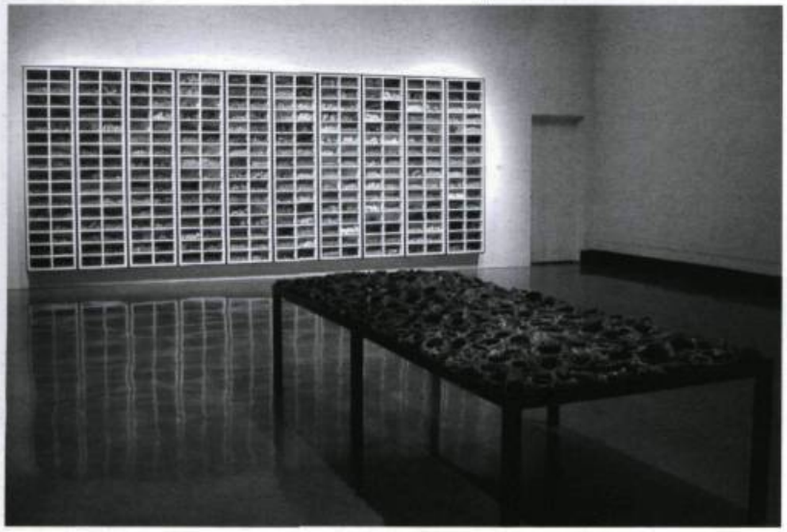
Lyndal Osborne *Selections from the Poetic Structure of the World*

VIRGINIA M. EICHHORN

For over twenty-five years Lyndal Osborne has been collecting objects that reflect what she describes as the life forces of nature. The selected objects include shells, seeds, plants, rocks, and other materials from the natural world, as well as fabricated items such as discarded wires, computer remnants, and industrial discards. She brings together the natural and the manufactured in such a way as to allow them to "[...] grow intuitively into a metaphorical installation, connecting my inner landscape with geographical memory."[1]



This "metaphoric installation" works on a number of levels. Compositionally, Osborne references collections in the context of museums and connoisseurship. The items are collected, categorized, ordered, and arranged. They are then displayed in a number of diverse but intentionally traditional manners. *Tableaux for Transformation* is a massive installation consisting of a display case with 320 compartments. Within each compartment are a number of small objects ranging from rhubarb seeds to Russian olive twigs, from leaves and rocks to copper wires. The uniform size of the compartments and the apparent random placement of the contents suggest that the artist feels all of the elements contained are of equal importance. There is no hierarchy here. Likewise, no distinction is made between the natural and synthetic materials. In fact, upon first viewing the installation, the synthetic materials are almost indistinguishable from the natural. One must carefully look and examine each compartment in order to find out which is which.

This is intentional on the artist's part. She believes that each individual object that she uses can be viewed as a small microcosm. The juxtaposition of these objects transforms their meaning and significance, bringing it from the realm of the physical to that of the spiritual or intuitive. In this, Osborne's approach calls back to ancient traditions. From the earliest times, people used all manner of sacred images or items as a means of accessing and mediating their relationship with the divine. These images or items were sometimes in their natural state, untouched and unchanged. Natural elements such as stones or trees were classified as acheiropoietic, that is coming from heaven, not made by human hands. The divine or the sacred was recognized in what surrounded one. Meaning and interpretation was key to recognizing the presence of the divine. This is the essence of Osborne's art project.

Osborne, while not referencing the divine or sacred within a theological context *per se*, nonetheless recognizes the inherent power and meaning in the seemingly ordinary objects that she brings to her art-making process. It is her arrangements and groupings of these collections which allow the viewer to recognize the presence of something beyond the objects' obvious physicality. Here, Osborne's work is antithetical to the anti-art or dada pieces of the early 20th century. In those art traditions, the power of the object to have significance was denied. For Osborne, the inherent or associative meaning of an object is essential.

The collections of objects in this exhibition are about many things, including the abstract and metaphorical, but they are also very much about empirical knowledge and understanding. The little "microcosms" with which we are presented speak loudly and eloquently about the world around us. *Points of Departure* consists of approximately 250 birds' nests lined with papier-mâché. Osborne's selected and discrete alterations of natural objects are intended to create a metaphor that mediates the juxtaposition of nature and culture with technology (archaeology and museology). Many of these empty nests are already comprised of natural and man-made elements, such as string or newsprint, which the birds themselves used in their creation. Some of these nests are incredibly small. They all appear fragile and delicate, needing to be treasured and taken care of. Clustered together on a steel table, the nests appear to be awaiting an examination of some kind. They evoke humankind's imposition on the natural world, often with the supposed intention of trying to understand it, but with often unforeseen and tragic consequences leading to the decimation and sometimes extinction of certain species. In fact, some of the flora and fauna that Osborne has in her collections is now extinct. They exist only as relics in museums and in her exhibition. In these cases, the world has lost knowledge, understanding, and part of its irreplaceable and unique poetic structure.

The nests in *Points of Departure* also provide a good example of the repeated rhythm one often finds in Osborne's work. Much of Osborne's activity in creating her work involves repeated action: gathering and collecting, then sometimes binding, dyeing or molding the elements together. These repeated actions take on a meditative significance for the artist, and almost brings her process of art-making into the realm of the ritualistic, hearkening back once again to acheiropoietic and pantheistic activities. For Osborne, this repetition of form and activity is also meant to evoke the passage of time, its alterations on each particular object.

A poem has been defined as (among other things) a composition of high beauty, thought, language, and artistic form. As such, Lyndal Osborne's *Selections for the Poetic Structure of the World* can be seen as a kind of visual poetry. Her work becomes a means of understanding the world and the relationships between the individual elements that make it up. It is not an ultimate, didactic resolution with which the viewer is presented. Rather, Osborne's work inspires and facilitates an enhanced and expansive means of looking at the world through sight, sound, touch, intuition, and memory. ←

LYNDAL OSBORNE, *Tableaux for Transformation*, 1998. Mixed media. Collection of the Alberta Foundation of the Arts. Photo: Zhe Gu.

LYNDAL OSBORNE, *Tableaux for Transformation*, 1998. Detail. Photo: Zhe Gu.

Lyndal Osborne: Selections from the Poetic Structure of the World
Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery, ON
March 30th to June 22nd, 2003

NOTE

1. Artist Statement 2003.