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New Museum Showcases the Bear Necessities

Teddy bear project is centerpiece of new exhibition on the quirks and compulsions of collecting

'Teddy Bear Black,' on view at the New Museum, was one of several bears given to children to commemorate the Titanic's sinking. *PHOTO: STEVE REMICH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**
July 19, 2016 8:42 p.m. ET

Hanging a picture flush and straight can be a bear—or 3,000 bears, as was the case for art installers this week at the New Museum.

For "Partners (The Teddy Bear Project)," the centerpiece of an exhibition about the quirks and compulsions of collecting, workers toiled to precisely arrange a floor-to-ceiling display of 3,000 vintage photographs, each showing a person posing with his or her furry object of affection.

Spiral staircases were erected in the gallery to reach a library-like mezzanine, to

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showcase photos up above. Visitors can also peer at a handful of actual antique bears in cases—from a 1913 teddy made to commemorate the sinking of the Titanic to a 1910 bear with electric light-up eyes.

"The piece is a little bit complicated," said Dean Baldwin, in charge of the installation team. "It's basically a museum inside of a museum."

The sprawling work is the creation of Ydessa Hendeles, a Toronto-based collector and artist for whom Mr. Baldwin has worked for more than a decade. The setting for it is "The Keeper," an ambitious exhibition filling the New Museum with idiosyncratic art devoted to—and comprised of—more than two-dozen collections of different kinds.

Workers install 'Partners (The Teddy Bear Project),' the centerpiece of 'The Keeper' exhibition at the New Museum. *PHOTO: STEVE REMICH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

The show explores the puzzle of why people accumulate things, and how those things develop meaning. The teddy bears, for example, are totems of formative bonding and familial love, while other holdings in the exhibition explore

collectors' desires to make some sense of the world.

"There is something heroic in people who go to great lengths to preserve objects, both of value and non-value," said Massimiliano Gioni, artistic director of the New Museum and co-curator of the show. "You're not just looking at 'good art,' but you're coming to see things because they tell stories or are documents of ways of being."

Collections on display range from fine art to everyday objects and folksy concoctions, all of which are equally worthy of museum attention for the devotion they command, according to Mr. Gioni.

One room is full of colorful stones on loan from the National Museum of Natural History in Paris that once belonged to French intellectual Roger Caillois, who consulted them for cryptic clues to the cosmos. Drawings of patterns on butterfly wings come from scrapbooks of the Russian-American writer Vladimir Nabokov. Sculptural creations of cardboard and wood were made in the attic of a psychiatric hospital by Brazilian artist Arthur Bispo do Rosário, who believed he was working to protect the world from a coming flood.

"All of his objects are invested with anxiety over the end of the world and replicating it so it could be saved," Mr. Gioni said.

'Partners (The Teddy Bear Project),' which was conceived by Ydessa Hendeles, is a floor-to-ceiling display of 3,000 vintage photographs. Each picture shows a person posing with a teddy bear. *PHOTO: STEVE REMICH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

The eclectic works in the show—"a series of imaginary museums," as Mr. Gioni

described them—mix different creative motivations and modes of making that can be unorthodox in the art world.

For Yuji Agematsu, a New York artist in the show, the lines between art-making materials and forgotten bits of rubbish blur.

For his tiny sculptures in the show, arranged on shelves like specimens, he walked the streets of the city and picked up anything he might find. The works, encased in cellophane from a cigarette box, include bits of foil, hair, candy wrappers, a lemon slice and the leg of a bird with an identification tag still attached.

“Don’t be afraid of trash,” Mr. Agematsu said of the wealth of materials at his disposal. “I’m a collector of very rare objects.”

The minds of collectors can be curious and unusual, he added—“very maniac minds.”

Yuji Agematsu's tiny sculptures are made out of things he found on city streets. *PHOTO: STEVE REMICH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

Howard Fried, a conceptual artist from California, has a work in the show called “The Decomposition of My Mother’s Wardrobe,” an arrangement of clothes amassed after his mother’s death in 2002. When regarded as part of a collection, Mr. Fried said, each piece takes on a new aura: “It’s a kind of magic. It has a life of its own.”

“The Keeper,” which opens Wednesday and remains on view through Sept. 25,

surveys that life and puts it on generous display.

For the teddy bear project, the large exhibit space was still being shaped and coated with paint on Monday, as patient bears awaited their placement. Every photo took its place according to a meticulous graphing system labeled on custom-made walls—shipped from Toronto, where Ms. Hendeles conceived them, rather than rebuilt to such exacting specifications.

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"These guys are charmers," Mr. Baldwin said of a pair of actual stuffed bears also on display, in a glass case—small"soldier bears" that were given to early 20th-century military men to put in their pockets during times of war. "They make you feel like you have someone on your side."

Thousands of photographs surrounded them, many from family collections cast off and found in thrift shops and antique stores.

A gold Elvis Presley record is part of the exhibition 'The Keeper.' *PHOTO: STEVE REMICH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

"These photographs no longer have people around to keep them," Mr. Baldwin said. "That makes this whole thing a memorial."