

# Magic in the Mundane: Objects and Collections as Artistic Ritual

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## Introduction

“Possessions that stayed with us for decades could be understood as mirroring our own experiences of time passing” (Sudjic, 2009 p.18).

I have always been surrounded by unusual and curious objects from a young age. Collecting was a normal part of my childhood and continued into my adult life. Some of these objects are from other countries, some are unusual finds from shops or in nature, some are pieces of art that have been handmade, and then there are the normal objects that are in most households. As Sudjic (2009) says, “Objects do not exist in a vacuum: They are part of a complex choreography of interactions” (p.54). Many of these objects came from my interactions with three influential people in my life; my mum, my uncle and my dad.

My mum travelled back and forth to Hong Kong by sea over a period of three years, collecting items from the far east, as well as places such as Japan, Russia and South Africa, picking up souvenirs and trinkets along the way. Souvenirs are a way to bring past experiences into the present, and remember events that cannot be relived (Pearce, 1994). Stewart (1992) explains that “the souvenir must be removed from its context in order to serve as a trace of it, but it must also be restored through narrative and/ or reverie” (p.151). This is exactly what has happened with my mum’s souvenirs. Some of the items were mass produced, inexpensive items but have been elevated in status by the experience and stories of how she came by them. Some of the jewellery from Japan and China was made from gold and semi-precious stones, often with origins in traditional eastern ritual. Later in life, if mum and I saw anything from the far east in charity shops, we bought it because it related to her travels and memories of a place in her past.

My actor uncle travelled to many different locations as an actor around the globe including feature film locations in Iraq and India, collecting objects along the way that mum and I inherited. He was also a collector of Victoriana and theatre memorabilia, including props, costumes and posters from some of his own performances. As a fan of Hammer Horror, a lot of his Victorian influences came from these old, atmospheric films. He painted his walls and furniture dark green to match this aesthetic and collected interesting old paintings by thrifting. His dark green chesterfield currently sits in my own home.

My dad grew up in Kenya and later moved to South Africa. For many years he sent me African masks while he was travelling around different parts of Africa for work. I ended up with a collection of different masks from different African countries. I also have a collection of CDs of African music that my dad had sent me.

These objects and collections are not simply 'things'. They are part of my history, my family's history, and form a large part of what makes me who I am. Like Barthes' camera lucida which relates to photographs, these objects capture a moment in time, and allow reflection on memory and mortality (Barthes, 1993). Throwing these objects away is not an option, as any collector and appreciator of visual culture would agree. Theorist of design and architecture Deyan Sudjic made this point when he said that "to discard even a useless object that I don't look at from one year to the next is somehow to discard a part of life" (2009 p.21).

The act of collecting can be seen as a ritual. Sudjic (2009) refers to the ritual of collecting as "a very special kind of fetish" (2009, p.21). My beach combing for found objects is a ritual for me. This essential part of my art came from seeing the amount of litter and beach debris washed up. During covid lockdown, I had time to spend picking litter from the beach. I noticed that some litter was new, but there was a lot of old items washed up from when the area was still a Victorian fishing village. I found an old workers boot from 1910 that had been preserved in the mud until it was uncovered, collections of parts of old smoking pipes, and parts of skiff fishing boats. I also find old glass bottles and old food wrappers with interesting lettering and designs on them, giving an insight into the past. By doing this ritual, I feel I have achieved something. I have helped clean up the beach, but I have also contributed to my own museum of found objects, or my collection of materials that can be included in future art projects or melted down to create a new object. This practice allows objects and self-made museum of artefacts to become the main parts of my art. Due to my connection with objects from my childhood, and my passion for history, archaeology, anthropology and curiosity from visiting museums with my mum, objects and rituals in art are important to me.

The artists in this essay all use the ritual and the magic of collecting objects as part of their craft. What connects me to each of these artists is the magic of elevating the mundane in a ritual of collecting and elevating the status of the objects through the combination of materials and presentation. For all three artists, I recognised a deeply ritualistic approach to

collecting, which is an essential process in my own practice. As makers, myself and the three artists cannot function without the collection. The artworks in this essay could all be described as magic and joyful, with dark undertones. This duality of emotions is what connects them to my own work.

Michael Ray elevated the status of found or inherited objects by creating a shrine to ordinary objects belonging to his grandmother. Like my own collection of objects, these objects are symbolically important. The display evokes an almost spiritual or religious ritual of remembrance and reflection.

Libby Bove uses found objects from a collection of auto parts and symbols, creating a collection of magical, almost paganistic objects, alongside a series of rituals for her van. She gives her objects a magical status by creating made-up rituals around them. Her van is her museum; a mysterious and dark cabinet of curiosities.

Finally, William Harper is a well-known artist within the craft and jewellery movements, with a career spanning seven decades and work held in museums around the world. His process involves a ritual of collecting and putting together unique visions from found objects, using his wealth of historical knowledge.

## Study 1: Jonathan Michael Ray

Jonathan Michael Ray is a Cornwall based artist who works with found objects and collections. His ritual of collecting and combing found objects began with a fascination with a restored broken church window. The fragmented piece, made up from broken pieces of the original glass and other pieces salvaged from elsewhere, inspired his own process of finding and collecting objects to elevate into something new and almost spiritual in nature. He began a ritual of trawling through junk yards and online platforms to find unusual pieces, such as fragments of a Victorian doorway, glass that is centuries old, and ornate architectural remains from old churches (Black, 2023). He finds some of his objects by chance, and others are ordered from suppliers, such as his stonework (Holman, 2022).

Ray is interested in the physicality of the objects he collects such as the thickness and texture, using the unique quality to create fictional narratives in his rearrangements of the objects. When visiting his exhibition at the Bo Lee & Workman gallery in Somerset, I had a personal tour and conversation with gallery manger Poppy Clover. I was told that when displaying his work, every detail of the exhibition is curated by Ray himself. The display is part of the art, so the gallery does not make the decisions on how the pieces are put together. Ray also decides how his work is mounted and makes the mounts and frames himself in a ritualist practise of elevating the status of every part of the objects (Clover, 2025).

One of Ray's projects that considers folklore and history was called 'Fieldwork'(2023) based in Orkney, where he spent a month on residency. The collection of work for 'Fieldwork' is his reaction to the cultural discoveries he made while in Orkney which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, paying tribute to its unique history and landscape, as well as literature, poetry and folklore. The exhibition itself is marketed as a moment of time in Ray's life. The artwork is a collection of newly conceived works includes sculptures, assemblages, drawings and photographs. Some of the photographs are of standing stones with ancient carvings, and others are of a fence post with barbed wire wrapped around it to show the boundary markers seen around the island [fig 1]. These and objects that he found around Orkney were all put together in a shrine-like communion (Retallick, 2024).



*Figure 1: Fieldwork, (2024) Jonathan Michael Ray [own photo]*

While in Orkney, Ray was also inspired by Poet George Mackay Brown, who wrote “The Orkney imagination is haunted by time” (Mackay Brown, 2021) which speaks to Ray’s Orkney inspired work.

Part of the Fieldwork exhibition included a display of objects found around Orkney that was on loan from the Gardemeles Museum curated by Rosey Prestman [figs 2 & 3]. The display

was described as a an “ever-growing collection of objects brought in and left behind by humans, sea and sky” (Bo Lee and Workman, 2025). This collaboration between Ray and the Gardemeles Museum comes from a shared approach to gathering and displaying objects. Gardemeles has been displaying objects found on one of the outer isles of Orkney since 1999, and include remains form an abandoned nineteenth century farmhouse and its outbuildings (Gardemeles Museum , 2025). Like Ray’s work, these objects and remains tell a story and develop growing meanings behind them.



Figure 2: Fieldwork (2024) Gardemeles Museum [own photo]



that Ray had the illusion that the jug was a precious object that had a high status for his grandmother. He later discovered that it was a mass-produced item that had meant very little to her, even though he had seen it as something special (Clover, 2025). John Berger questions “to whom does the meaning of the art of the past properly belong?” (1972, p. 32), suggesting that the meaning behind art and objects is subjective, and Ray’s own meaning of the jug can be projected onto it.



Figure 4: Pilgrim, (2024) Jonathan Michael Ray [own photo]

It could be argued that Ray found it difficult to let go of things that reminded him of his grandmother because it was part of his mourning process, which is a biological expression of

need (Gottessegen, 1977). This was expressed by psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud who collected nearly 2,000 objects after his father passed away as a way to create a “space of loss and absence, grief and memory” (Fuss, 2004, p. 79). According to Roland Barthes (2015), this preoccupation with meaningful objects a compulsion for ritual is the way of the collector.

I chose to do a case study on Jonathan Michael Ray because I felt his work related to my own as an artist who uses found objects, and more than that, has an interest in the natural landscape and archaeology. Ray work is often Influenced by geographical places, as was the case with his ‘Fieldwork’ installation. This is also something captured in my own work as the found objects are heavily connected to their geographical location, such as finding copper and ghost fishing nets in a coastal town with a history in copperworks.

What also astounded me when visiting the ‘Fieldwork’ exhibition was that the objects displayed from the Gardemeles Museum from Orkney were similar to the objects I find in beaches in Wales. This sense of recognition is common when viewing collections of memorabilia (Candlin, 2016). Some of the objects were clearly left over from the Scott family who lived there for 80 years, but there were also objects found on the beaches like children’s toys in various degree of disintegration, parts of fishing traps and nets, bones of animals, birds and sea life, as well as the plastic objects. These are very similar to the items that I find on beaches on the other side of the United Kingdom. Furthermore, there is evidence in the Gardemeles display of spoons and elements of copper with different degree of Verdigris, which are items that I often find and use in my art, especially living in a former copper works town (Evans & Miskell, 2020) .

## Study 2: Libby Bove

Libby Bove is a multidisciplinary artist who works with symbols and objects. Her work centres on myths, masks, folk festival, and a mini museum inside her van. I met the artist personally at an event in Bristol earlier this year, so I was able to ask her about her concepts and process. I asked her how she comes up with her ideas, and she explained to me that she lives in her van, and noticed that the MOT always comes up in the springtime, so she associates this necessary ritual with her van with the spring equinox (Bove, 2025). This links into concepts that she finds important, such as the pagan season of rebirth, renewal and fertility, Ostara (pagan rebirth) and Belton (blossoming of life) (O'Gaea, 2009).

Libby Bove creates costumes for performers and collaborates with dancers [figs 5&6]. One of her main inspirations is artist Asha Uberoi who is “fascinated by the cultural coding of historic artefacts, [and] crafts characterised recreations of ancient figures and motifs, taking them out of the traditional museum and into reimagined world” (Asha Uberoi, 2025). Bove works across many mediums and has different processes for each medium she works with but the approaches are similar. Her approach usually involves some quick sketches and watercolours but the main part of her process is making. “Works develop through a fairly manic and chaotic making process, I’ll often have a few things on the go at once...the studio awash with fabric, clay and foraged plants...It’s in no way methodical, but it does work” (Libby Bove, 2025). The displaying stage sometimes includes someone to model her work, and usually places her work into an imagined historic, or futuristic context before being photographed (Libby Bove, 2025).



*Figure 5: Libby Bove (2025) wearing a 'Gasket Dancer' headdress, taken at The Gleaner's Feast, the Fireboat station, Bristol 27th September (own photo)*



Figure 6: A Diesel Clapper from Libby Bove.com website

Within her work, she combines the real issue of having to MOT her van, with magical practices and folk customs. “Central to my practice... is an imagined construct where plant knowledge, magic and ritual play essential roles in the repair and maintenance of vehicles” (Bove, 2025). Bove conjures a scene where roadside breakdowns can be remedied through ritualistic incantations as well as jump leads. Her worked ‘Museum of Roadside Magic’ is a combination of folklore and vehicular maintenance (Selvedge, 2025). This includes ceramic and tyre charms to ensure safe travels, traffic cone incense holders and performance costume relics to be worn as part of a pre-MOT blessing (Judah, 2025). In this way, Bove explores the connection between folk custom and magical practices with mundane daily life (Libby Bove, 2025). This shows how rituals infiltrate every area of our lives, as argued by

Johnson (2019), who states that “rituals give us scripts to follow to help us order our lives and to find meaning in a world that often appears mundane”.

While her work looks magical and paganistic, the symbols and objects she uses comes from cars and vans. Her ‘Travelling Museum of Roadside Magic’, is a culmination of the multidisciplinary work she started at university. As an art student, Bove explored photograph, film, sound, sculpture, print and textiles. “The term ‘Roadside Magic’ relates to the study of folk ritual, plant knowledge and magic, in the repair, maintenance and operation of vehicles” (Sunny Bank Mills, 2025). Bove acknowledges that treating mechanical issues as a ritualistic practice may seem ridiculous, but she reminds us that only a few generations back, folk rituals were an intrinsic part of agricultural life for a healthy harvest. Noting that some of the rituals were often strange, doing herb parades to prevent gasket leaks or a ‘molly dance’ for an MOT no longer seems so bizarre (Bove, 2025).

What if the witch crazes never happened? What if plant knowledge, intention and ritual were still part of daily life? What would our world look like if that shared folk knowledge and culture hadn’t been obliterated? I came to the conclusion we would be using it, amongst other things, to fix our cars (Libby Bove, 2025).

By combining her university projects disciplines together, she created an exhibition inside her van. Some of the artefacts contained within the ‘Travelling Museum of Roadside Magic’ moved into her ‘Roadlore Archive’. This contains a series of objects and symbols relating to cars and vans used as charms and objects of ritual (Sunny Bank Mills, 2025). Bove recreates the look of a dowdy local museum in her van, using lit-up cabinets with outfits and objects on display [figs 7 & 8]. Artefacts in her exhibition include maypole figures with coloured ribbons to represent the wiring found in a seven-pin plug, and a gasket headdress and other costumes she created as part of her pre-MOT vehicle blessings (Judah, 2025). She also shows her photos of dancers in costumes she has designed and plays recordings of her chants, songs and dances as well as ‘esoteric practices’ that she created as part of ‘vehicular maintenance, repair and journey making’ ritual. Her travelling exhibition has toured the South-West of England since she graduated in 2024. The aesthetic choice makes it looks as

though her photos and objects are from an older time and a genuine part of folk custom, giving her creations a nostalgic feel (Judah, 2025). But as Stewart points out, nostalgia is “always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative” (Stewart, 1992, p. 23). This suggests that nostalgia is a longing for something we never had, or for “something that their parents had or their grandparents had” (Arnold-Forster, 2024 p.107) Arnold-Forster defines nostalgia as an emotional state, and that we are nostalgic for moments in time that we invest with meaning” (p. 8), so this would suggest that nostalgia speaks of a time that did exist and a moments we remember. In either case, it is important to note that if objects or relics from the past are no longer seen in a nostalgic way, they will stop being magic or sacred (Berger, 1972).



*Figure 7: Cabinet photographs from the museum depicting 'Guise Blessers' (own photo)*



*Figure 8: A Recovery Driver costume in the museum exhibition (own photo)*

A key aspect of Bove's work is creating new rituals and historical looking artefacts. This ties in with my own work as we both use found objects and create new objects by combining the pieces that we find. Like Bove, I display my collections using different methods of archival and museum curation. In my more recent work, I have started enjoying creating ancient-looking objects. For these reasons, Bove has become a recent inspiration for me.

### Study 3: William Harper

William Harper is an American, mixed media artist who uses metals, enamel and found objects. The result is a contrasting blend of antique and industrial aesthetics with natural objects including animal bone and the more mundane objects such as coffee jar lids and bicycle reflectors. His work explores different ritualistic realms including ancient mythology, medieval art, African sculpture, Celtic design, and museums as well as modernist dance and performance, music and theatre (Adamson & Fleischman, 2024). Harper has become known for his jewellery, and says that; “My designs are intended for the person who does not want just beautiful, precious, mass produced jewelry. My designs are intended for those people who are not afraid of the different or the unusual” (William Harper, 2023).

One of the earliest pieces of jewellery that harper designed is the brooch ‘Fetish Brooch #3’, in 1976 (Craft Arts International, 1994). The brooch is an enamelled piece consisting of pearl, raw electroplated shapes and found objects including a racoon bone [fig 9]. The brooch also embodied Harper’s fascination with exploring the duality of masculine and feminine.

Harper’s act of taking discarded objects and make them precious gives value to the unwanted and elevate it to the status of jewellery.



Figure 9: Fetish Brooch #3 (1976) William Harper

Harper's work embodies a lifelong appreciation of cultural artefacts and ethnographic objects. His art with objects and materials have a range of symbolic meaning. For example, his early 1970s series of fetishist-looking rattles and amulets was inspired by the diversity of African art. His enamel jewellery incorporates non-traditional materials such as electroformed copper, bone, feathers, teeth, claws shells, fur and insects, and creates a narrative of meaning which is often about his own identity. Harpers jewellery and object art have an unusual aesthetic and 'unexpected beauty'. He started making enamel jewellery as a 'pagan aesthetic' attempting conjure up "saints and martyrs, barbarians, and serpents in the form of jewelry" (Diamond Club West Coast, 2025). Harper's work moved away from what was trending in America at the time by creating his own aesthetic. While his contemporaries started working with the minimalist Scandinavian Modern look, Harper experimented with new methods, taking inspiration from other cultures, taking risks by challenging conventional approaches to jewellery design. By using found objects he created a unique style with unpredictable results as he was relying on available found materials. Adamson commented that; "many jewelers have vigorously contested that bigotry of low expectations, but very few with Harper's daring, nuance, and intellectual depth while operating entirely independently of what jewelry normally looks like or 'should' be" (Diamond Club West Coast, 2025). Harper does not sketch out ideas before starting a collection (William Harper, 2023). Instead, he draws inspiration from the objects themselves, possible sketching with the objects by arranging them before deciding how to assemble the composition. It is likely that he sketches in his head, imagining how the pieces will be arranged, blending his design sense with creative intuition. His work comprises of precious metals and stones as well as found objects that he encounters, giving each piece a unique personality of its own.



Figure 10: Flotsam II (2007) by William Harper

Harper's inspiration comes from some abstract concepts such as allusion and instinct, as well as taking inspiration from mythology, and his interest in the humanities and religious artefacts. It could be argued that his religious iconography is not intended to be religious or anti-religious but instead as an appreciation of the art. He uses a lot of colours, shapes and materials that are used in religious artefacts, often in Catholic and Orthodox churches, but in Harper's work there is room for interpretation (Adamson & Fleischman, 2024).



*Figure 11: Archaic Self-Portrait of the Artist (1998) William Harper*

Harper likes to surround himself with his vast collection of various ethnographic objects. Amongst these objects is a West African Senufo fertility doll, which he received in 1967 as a gift from his partner. His home and studio space are as one, with his home surroundings providing him with continuous inspiration. His home has always been Harper's studio where all his work is made, including paintings and drawings, as well as his jewellery pieces. His house and workspace is described as sharing a space with precious stones, gems and gold (Adamson & Fleischman, 2024).

Harper's vivid work has been described as "often strange and mysterious, yet comic and pleasing" (Klimt02, 2025). This resonates with my own work, which is symbolic and meaningful with a dark playfulness and undertone. Including influences from other cultures, with themes of death and memory.

My connection to this artist comes not only from the work with found objects and making wearable pieces, but also his process. As an artist and maker, Harper likely creates his work as a second nature, using intuition about what will work. When working with found objects there is less control over how a piece will turn out as it depends on the objects used. This creates a variation in form and colour compared to using mass produced objects. This creates a playfulness in his work which I see in my own practice. Like my own found objects, Harper's house is full of objects waiting for a project. Artists who work with found objects often put things away until they can be used. Like Harper, my pieces will always be unique. Even if using the same object in multiple pieces, such as found bottle tops, they will always have varying degrees of degradation. As part of Harper's clash of cultures, he meshes eras by combining objects or motifs from the past with contemporary objects, as well as combining found objects with materials of value. This can be seen across my work, where there might be Ancient Egypt symbology with modern day sweet wrappers. Like Harper's each piece of my work has its own personality.

## Conclusion

The artists in this essay are all connected by their shared compulsion for collecting, and their ritualistic practice of collecting and using found objects to create art, thereby elevating the status of the found object.

For each of these artists, there is a deeply personal reason for collecting. For Jonathan Michael Ray, his collections stem from an interest in history as well as using his collection of objects from his grandmother as part of his mourning process. His display of her objects became a ritual offering in the form of a shrine. Libby Bove used her connection with pagan ritual and magic to apply to van maintenance, creating new rituals. This began her collection of motor related objects, giving her a strange duality of magic and mundane. William Harper's interest in other cultures and historical influences contributed to his ritual of collecting found objects to combine with precious materials.

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