





CABINETS OF CURIOSITY

DOMESTIC ARCHIVES IN RECENT WORK BY MICHAEL HUEY

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Michael Huey does not just make photographs; he makes pictures. Working from a rich collection of sources – found historical photographs, beloved family snapshots, painstakingly preserved heirlooms – he resurrects old images and stages new ones, appropriating narratives without disturbing them. His images record history and revivify the objects that contain it, probing the contours that arise between past and present, and reconnecting discrete temporalities in an alternative time and place: the present. Huey’s reverent curiosity and artistic acumen converge elegantly in *China Cupboard*, his most recent body of work and the subject of my thoughts here, as he maneuvers across time armed with an eye for excavating the spectacular from the mundane.

These window-like, rectangular shots, each measuring 40 × 53 cm, depict cabinets filled with place settings and stemware, knickknacks and containers, carefully displayed on shelves and, in some cases, behind transparent, protective doors. Documenting both *things* and *tastes*, *China Cupboard* offers intimate insights into objects without tying them to the specific lives they embellish. The arrangements that play out in the nearly fifty photographs made since 2005 provoke questions about not only the untold provenance of the items they contain but also the occasions to which they have borne witness – anniversaries, celebrations, and lamentations. The unseen owners of these wares are not strangers to the artist; they are friends, family, and confidants, their acknowledged

absence helping forge a delicate path through anonymity to the private. *China Cupboard* self-consciously distances the viewer from the human subjects featured in earlier projects and instead brings into focus the domestic scenarios and imaginations staged in their possessions. In gracefully highlighting a mechanism at work in the human psyche – to collect both to remember and to be remembered – the series not only inscribes itself in a history of photography but also takes lessons from the history of art in the West.

China Cupboard captures ‘found’ arrangements and thus bears a ‘readymade’ quality, much like the personal and historical images Huey incorporated in earlier projects, whether mid-century photographic transparencies portraying relatives in *Betsy and I Killed the Bear* or nineteenth-century images of Mt. Vesuvius erupting. He produces a meditation on photography itself, a medium uniquely positioned to serve as an index of history, purporting to show us what is, and indeed was, really there. But images such as *E.L.* make clear that photography itself is fragile, its emulsion pool vulnerable to the same passage of time that renders its sitters obsolete.

Countering the artist’s fascination with the already ruined state of antiquity is his commitment to cataloguing personal histories illustrated through material goods. In that vein, *China Cupboard no. 9* preserves a museum-like vitrine in which Biedermeier pitchers face in one direction

as they show different variations on a theme, much like the charts of anatomical perfection and deformities generated by nineteenth-century eugenics, which sought to essentialize human qualities vis-à-vis physical appearance and racial makeup. An antiseptic, fetishistic study of vessels that centers around the implicit authority accorded to a small, classical bust, this image annotates the taxonomies applied to extracted objects designated to play certain roles in a curated history.

Like the muted vessels that populate the still life paintings of Italian modernist Giorgio Morandi, Huey’s analogous, softly glowing objects appear, at times, almost architectonic, miniature urban landscapes in their own right in *China Cupboard no. 1*. These carefully positioned and purposefully aligned pitchers, urns, and teacups intermingle with other personal accoutrements – a hat, plumed perfume bottles, and accessory trays – occupying a curious space that might be more at home in the boudoir. Huey reverses, but never adjusts, the color values of his pictures, shifting each hue into its opposite as he memorializes the private space of personal effects. In so doing, he enacts ‘x-ray vision’, permitting a glance of possessions that reads as interior and provides a tangible infrastructure that stands for the invisible psychological impulses underpinning the archival impulse.¹

Glass Cupboard no. 2, part of the same series, offers especially rich connections with the early history of



photography. Images such as this one eerily echo those of William Henry Fox Talbot, an early pioneer of photographic technology who similarly organized photographs labeled “Articles of China” and “Articles of Glass” in his 1844–1846 book *The Pencil of Nature*. Talbot believed that photographic images could provide as much information as written inventories, perhaps surpassing them in their capacity to do so *at once*.² Huey, like Talbot, sees this possibility in photography’s operations, though his series provides variations on Talbot’s theme, exploring repeatedly the informational potential of each image and, by extension, the unique stories it can convey. Often incomplete but ever orderly, Huey’s carefully arranged sets of cordial glasses, along with miniature liqueur bottles with stoppers, promise a degree of elegance and service to those who use or at least view them, whether guest or host. Moreover, they offer a personalized taxonomy of social conventions in a form of self-representation that links identity to accoutrements.

Looking back to an earlier work that predates this series, *Library* (2005), confirms Huey’s investment in photography as a tool for cataloguing, in this case

a family album assembled for insurance purposes a century ago. *Library* provides a view of more than the furnishings and art that filled his great-great grandparents’ apartment in the Chicago Beach Hotel in 1912. Not merely a practical representation of a room and its contents, *Library* is rather a belated photographic image of those items shot *in situ* and sealed beneath the formerly separable, translucent, and meticulously marked onionskin that floats above the original photograph. Huey’s more recent photograph encompasses a century of family history *and* administrative details by picturing his family’s property cloaked in the administrative anxiety expressed by the handwritten, numerical notations that correspond to the individual objects resting below them. *Library* forcefully memorializes matter along with the mindset that governed the possession and transmission of it. Huey’s archival instinct as an artist hinges on assessing the complexity of historical time, sifting out the multiple temporalities that are compressed into the objects, images, and scenes that we encounter in the present.

China Cupboard addresses questions of historical time and present discovery over the course of its images, each shelf offering an episode in a larger storyline. To

wit, *China Cupboard no. 37* features two shelves of pale porcelain figures whose ornate, rococo forms appear as if in a museum gallery or storehouse. Various sized, suggesting that some are human and some divine, these spectral figures dance amidst miniature urns, a clock, and porcelain socles that exude shadows of antiquity and its seemingly endless *Nachleben*. These crowded shelves no longer seem filled with tchotchkes and kitschy candlesticks, and instead dramatize a clandestine visit to a private warehouse of sculptures (or their surrogates) by Praxiteles and Phidias, Bernini or Canova. And yet while the image transports us to a place akin to the treasure troves of the Capitoline or Vatican Museums, the hazy, atmospheric glow that cloaks the image alludes to operatic productions and stage sets with fog rolling in. Such implied storylines subtly awaken these uncanny figures, like the toys coming alive in E.T.A. Hoffmann’s short story “The Nutcracker and the Mouse King” (1816) or the sculpture in Jean Cocteau’s *Blood of a Poet* (1928).

The composition of *China Cupboard no. 31* combines two of the main mechanisms at work in the series, offering a lyrical episodic narrative in its upper register with a more banal view of a storage system below. Lined up as



if *in motion* and clustered into discrete groupings, these fanciful *Lladró* collectibles produce five episodes in a narrative format that mimics the organizational structure of the predella panels of medieval and Renaissance altarpieces, which offer similar comic-strip-like runners to explain the lives of specific saints. Moreover, the glowing pastel pinks and cool blues – here re-imagined in wood grain in reverse – likewise speak to *trecento* frescoed murals, such as those by Giotto in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, where similar colors and compartments prevail. These narratives rest above generic piles of dishes that generate a geometric pattern echoing the *trompe l'oeil* dado patterns frequently featured below episodic narratives on chapel walls. Transporting the viewer to spectacular sites extends Huey's touristic lens, familiar from earlier visits to ornate interiors, such as the Hofburg Palace in Vienna, achieved by reprinting glass slides uncovered at a flea market.

China Cupboard no. 12 provides a glimpse of more modern history amidst three rows of neatly arranged cups and saucers, plates, teapots, and dishes. A vivid group portrait of the history of industrial design in Europe emerges with a teapot by Timo Sarpaneva

in the upper left-hand corner next to a tea set by Austrian designer Josef Hoffmann in the upper right-hand corner. Juxtaposing a key player in the history of twentieth-century Finnish design, and indeed one of the masterminds behind *Iittala* for more than half a century, with one of the founders of the *Wiener Werkstätte*, this image celebrates two *Meister* of design who preside above less notable, more mainstream wares. High and low design, originals and reproductions intermingle behind closed cabinet doors, reflecting the heterogeneity of proprietors' tastes as well as how disparate preferences collide as objects turn into heirlooms carried forward from one generation to the next, whether by choice or by accident. And yet, amidst the dramatic personalities contained in these six tidy compartments, we again find a soft grey background highlighted with shades of pink and turquoise that recall frescoed walls of churches and town halls from another time and place.

The neuroses and narcissism that underpin our desire to accumulate those objects that best represent us – or at least our habits – apply to not only our finest china and stemware but also, and perhaps even more so, the nondescript items that inform our experience of the

everyday. The ceramic cups, bowls, plates, and glass tumblers in *China Cupboard no. 40* come alive through Huey's swift chromatic reassignment that shifts the role of these forms from dishes and containers to crisp, simplified geometric shapes found in Color Field painting or Neo-Geo. Huey finds beauty in the banal, perhaps most strongly stated in *China Cupboard no. 38*, arguably his simplest shot, which describes uniform dinner dishes and the plate separators that will ensure their survival. Black, white, and gray stripes and curved lines create a composition that transforms the banal into the fantastic, with abstractions that allude to Op Art, a gesture further explored in *China Cupboard no. 5*, where the moiré pattern of a reflected shutter injects a funhouse atmosphere into an otherwise ordered world.

China Cupboard no. 8 moves out of the salon and into the boudoir, with shelves cluttered with personal paraphernalia – purse pens and religious reliquaries, vases and souvenirs – that intermingle with framed photographs. The moiré-lined back and velvet-covered lower shelf signal the significance of this sacred shrine, while Buddha statuettes and beaded slippers expose the proprietor's propensity for flourishes of exotica. The



dual action of Huey's photographic gestures underscores the medium's potential for both imperfect and perfect temporalities. This clever shot perceives an accumulation of history and personal effects, and the density of the image is underscored by the photographs contained within it, each a glimpse of another instant cherished and memorialized. The framed snapshots within the picture theorize this aspect of photography in a self-reflexive gesture that, though potent, is itself yet another 'found' phenomenon, one that we all live with in our own collections, where images and artifacts serve as surrogates for the irretrievable experiences and absent individuals that they metonymically evoke. Literally 'negatives' once again, these embedded photographs speak volumes, like the items around them, about the various impulses underwriting our perpetual accumulation and analysis of goods, a feeble attempt to personalize and stabilize the universal insecurities that inform the human condition.

But the contribution of Huey's current artistic activity becomes clearer if we look outside of photography for a moment and back at the history of painting. In writing about still life, Norman Bryson notes that the genre has a particular capacity to eliminate "the subject's access to *distinction*," setting up a dialectic in which painting can be divided into two realms of representation: "megalography," defined as "the depiction of those things in the world which are great – the legends of the gods, the battles of heroes, the crises of history" and

"rhopography," defined as "the depiction of those things which lack importance, the unassuming material base of life that 'importance' constantly overlooks." While I find Bryson's analysis of the genre compelling, Huey's intimate photographic essays propose a challenge in that they imply (and indeed impose) the narratives that Bryson reserves for the megalographic onto the rhopographic.³

Playing on conventions of the Renaissance *Kunstkammer*, *China Cupboard* asserts a more subtle taxonomy that reflects at once individual tastes and the universal human tendency toward organization, preservation, and display. Preying on our desire to isolate the specific but undermining that with a language of mass-production, these images frame a Nietzschean spirit of eternal return. In this way, Huey's contemporary cabinets of curiosity formulate (self-)portraits of individual lives that metonymically portray the psychological infrastructure of our behavior, writ large, that underwrites an impulse to remind others to not forget us. Pictures of memory and history, the images that comprise *China Cupboard* blur the boundaries between the two, cataloguing not only relics, but the emotions that inform them, translating emotional and physical souvenirs into photographic fact.

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1 – For a provocative discussion of the pervasiveness of the archive in contemporary art, and especially work involving photography, see Okwui Enwezor, "Archive Fever: Photography Between History and the Monument," in *Archive Fever: Use of the Document in Contemporary Art*, exhibition catalogue (New York: International Center for Photography/Steidl, 2007), 11–51; see also Ingrid Schaffner and Matthias Winzen, eds. *Deep Storage. Collecting, Storing, and Archiving in Art*, exhibition catalogue (Munich: Prestel, 1998), which likewise examines the deployment of collecting as a pervasive strategy in contemporary art at the end of the last century.

2 – See Carol Armstrong, *Scenes in a Library: Reading the Photograph in the Book, 1843–1875* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1998), esp. 138–144.

3 – See Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 61. See esp. Chapter 2, "Rhopography", 60–95.

Page 17 left: *Ash Cloud* 2008

Based on a 1870s image of Vesuvius by Giorgio Sommer

C-print, diasec-mounted on dibond and framed

40 × 56 cm, edition of five

Page 17 middle: *E.L.* 2008

C-print, diasec-mounted on dibond and framed

53 × 40 cm, edition of five

Page 17 right: *Library* 2005

Based on a 1912 photograph in an inventory album

C-print, diasec-mounted on aluminum

44 × 60 cm, edition of five

Page 18 left: *Palace (no.1)* 2005

Based on anonymous stereograph glass negative from ca. 1900

C-print, diasec-mounted on aluminum

30 × 30 cm, edition of three

Page 18 right: *China Cupboard (no. 38)* 2011

C-print, mounted on aluminum and framed

40 × 53 cm, edition of five