

(Un)Familiar *by Mary Bucci McCoy*

Carol McMahon collects quotidian objects—furniture, toys, dolls and their furniture, and other accoutrements of home and childhood—discarded by others. She brings these remnants of domesticity to her studio, where she orders the objects and works surrounded by them, spread out so that she can see all that she has amassed. From this array she selects objects to engage with through intuitive, improvisational creative play that might include cutting the objects up, taking them apart, reorienting them in space, painting, and assembling them.

In these found objects McMahon discovers, rather than a bland mass-produced anonymity, the energetic spirit of the people who made, owned, used, and handled them. When she works with an object she engages not just with its physical but also its intangible qualities, and in turn as she works her own energy is added. When she describes her collected objects as the equivalent of paint for a painter—a palette of raw materials that can be manipulated to create an image or an effect—it is not just the physical, functional or narrative attributes of the objects that form her vocabulary.

McMahon's family moved every few years throughout her childhood, repeatedly recreating themselves in each new home they moved to; in that sense their being a family was a creative act, and the moves a part of it. As McMahon settled into each new home and unpacked her possessions, she would discover that beloved toys had disappeared, her mother having decided which toys should be kept and which toys discarded with the move. As a result of her repeated experiences of the familiar disappearing and lack of control over the things that mattered to her, she

learned to not become especially attached to things. And in adulthood, saving things and knowing what she has are important to her.

When McMahon takes apart one of her objects—when, for instance, she removes the “pelt” of a mechanical plush animal—she does so to discover and expose what is hidden, eliminating illusions in both a literal and figurative sense. It is her way of addressing childhood through straightforwardness, working from the viewpoint that it is better for things to be out in the open than hidden.

Multiple tensions in McMahon's work exclude the possibility of sentimentality. Her affinity for objects that are clumsy or awkward rather than graceful or elegant, coupled with her frequent spatial reorientation of familiar objects, gives her work a feeling of dislocation: things are simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar, comfortable and uncomfortable. And when she purposefully negates the functionality of objects by actions such as binding or nailing—whether that negation is visible to the viewer or not—the actions are deliberate, specific and necessary. They become part of the energy of the piece.

McMahon often unifies assembled objects into a whole by painting them white. This amplifies the presence of the unpainted or colored elements of a piece, while simultaneously creating a ghostly, not-quite-present feeling. And as the whiteness partially erases the physical characteristics of the objects, the shadows cast by the work further dissolve the solidity of the work, suggesting a process of purification, dissolution, and letting go.

Mary Bucci McCoy is a Boston-based painter who exhibits nationally. She frequently writes about art for publication.