UC SANTA BARBARA

THE Current

June 17, 2019
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The Art of Nothing

“Cereal boxes were my first literature. I spent virtually every morning of my childhood reading the box while ruminating on the cereal, long before I ever perused a morning newspaper.” — William Davies King, “Collections of Nothing”

William Davies King spent a good chunk of his adult life becoming one of the top scholars of Eugene O’Neill in the country. He has endeavored for considerably longer as a premier collector of stuff hardly anyone wants.

Both sides of King met, however obliquely, Thursday, June 20, in the Modern Dance Studio in the Humanities and Social Sciences Building. It is there that the Distinguished Professor of Theater and Dance created a “Tree of Life™” with more than 2,100 cereal boxes he has collected for nearly 40 years.

And then his creation disappeared.

Think of his empty boxes of Life — “He likes it! Hey Mikey!” — as the grains of sand Tibetan monks use to create a mandala. Kellogg’s, General Mills, Post, Trader Joe’s, and so on: they create a rainbow of colors to arrange. They are the medium for meditation on ephemera, the unloved scraps of consumer culture in the modern world.

“I imagine that when I lay this out as a mandala,” King said, “there will be a kind of revisiting of the scope of a whole life — at least my life.”

“I love it all. I love you*, for what you do not love, what you throw away. There’s a sad paradox in that. I love you for your lack of love for what I love.”* — “Collections of Nothing”

For many people, being a collector is to be obsessed with a single subject: hubcaps, Soviet propaganda posters, stamps, mousetraps, Victorian underwear; the list is endless. King, however, is … different. “I collect nothing — with a passion,” as he wrote in the perfectly titled “Collections of Nothing” (University of Chicago Press). His nothings are tuna can labels (at least 55 varieties), envelope linings, bits of metal, tea bag tags — and those boxes of Life, Cheerios, Count Chocula and everything else.

“I grew up in a house where the idea of keeping something like this is just, ugh,” said King, who grew up in Canton, Ohio. “My whole culture, my whole family and society said, ‘No, you just dispose of trash and move on to the new product. All you want is the new.’ And somehow I developed this nostalgia, this sense that returning to the past is something that is satisfying or soothing to me.”

His collection of cereal boxes — all but one or two the shells of breakfasts past and carefully sorted — reflects his appreciation of marketing and packaging to draw people to a product. He notes that Quaker Oats, the maker of Life, has zero connection to the Religious Society of Friends. The company, he said, “just thought it would sell. Purely commercial opportunity. Honesty, purity, all of those things. They said, ‘That’s good for selling cereal.’ ”

For King, his collection is also art. He practices bibliolage, the creation of whole book collages using bits from the collection. The tension between art and commerce is inescapable — and maybe the point.

“It is a celebration of material culture wrapped around a contempt for material culture. It is a burgeoning collection full of emptiness. It is a collection of nothing. That is my title, and I am its lord, its consumer and author and subject and victim.” — “Collections of Nothing”

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