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[Keith Hamm](#)

Expansive collections of ‘things of no value,’ nearly 10,000 items worth nothing, at heart of new Red Barn art exhibition

Much like the process of creating art, the act of collecting is often considered a basic human instinct. For William Davies King, the pursuit of both has been a lifelong endeavor.

King started collecting when he was a kid, as most kids do. While his friends spent money on comics and baseball cards, King accumulated interesting rocks and other found objects that were free and close at hand. “I developed a philosophy of nothing because I didn’t have the money — or the interest, frankly — to collect the cool stuff,” remembers King, who has been a professor of theater history and dramatic literature at UC Santa Barbara since 1987.

Turns out, King didn’t need much money to nurture his artistic instincts. His collections, he points out, consist of easily stored ephemera found in abundance, such as food labels, cereal boxes, produce stickers, hotel door cards, envelope panels and “other things of no specific value,” he said. “I don’t save what I can’t flatten, and it has to be something that comes through my regular pattern of consumption and with a label or design that interests me. No eBay for me.”

Now in exhibit form, King's collections will be on display this summer. The first installment of "The Museum of Nothing" opens June 22, from 4-7 p.m. at the Red Barn art gallery, located inside the Old Gym next to the bus circle on the UCSB campus. A second installment — which King describes as "entirely different but equally nothing" — opens July 7. Both events are free and open to the public.

The show will be open 12-2 p.m. on weekdays and 11 a.m.-3 p.m. on Sundays. "I will also be happy to arrange a private viewing outside of those hours," Davies said. "Please send a request to king@theaterdance.ucsb.edu." Davies will provide updates at williamdaviesking.com.

Among other stuff, the show will feature what he calls his kitchen collection, including a wall of blueberry labels, a nearly 30-foot display of "extreme ephemera" and a corner of the gallery space built up as a web of empty Cheez-It cracker boxes, King said. Roughly 10,000 items will be on display.

"As an artist, collecting is what I do," he said. "It's my process. This show takes collecting beyond the accumulation of things into something that is a work of art."

At first glance, King's collections can evoke feelings of nostalgia and anti-consumerism. On another level, his painstakingly arranged pieces reveal a practiced eye for color and design and, through collage, a connection to creative instincts found in children and professional artists alike.

"Nothing is a concept I have nurtured and borne, and it's deep in the plentiful stuff I can show," King said. "It might leave you profoundly unchanged and gloriously ready for less."

King first detailed his background and mode of "collecting nada," he said, in his 2008 memoir "Collections of Nothing," published by University of Chicago Press. A decade later, with the help of his two daughters, he took over the floor of a campus dance studio to lay out more than 2000 flattened cereal boxes as a giant mandala entitled [Tree of Life](#).

From 2020-22, UCSB Library hosted King's "The Creative Edge of Collecting," an exhibit co-curated by Rhiannon Gonzales, who was then an undergraduate student in the Museum Studies Program. With the library all but deserted during the pandemic, King shared his work with a video tour on YouTube.

King plans to retire at the end of the 2023–24 academic year and finish up a book that’s grown out of the “Collectors and Collecting” freshman seminar he’s been teaching since 2010.

He’ll also focus on finding a permanent home for “The Museum of Nothing.”

“Like most artists, I’m not as successful at putting myself out there as I ought to be,” he said. “But this show is a foray into making something of it — this lifelong accumulation of collecting nothing.”

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