

# ARE YOU WHAT YOU OWN?

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There is a strange fascination with our relationship to useless items; a useless item is something that serves no purpose in day-to-day life. Almost everyone I've asked agrees that the objects I have collected are "cute" and "interesting." We place feelings into knick-knacks with the hope of feeling happy. Some people would disagree with the idea of buying useless stuff because it is a waste of money. However, I feel collecting things is open for interpretation.

After many weeks of collecting, creating, and searching, I have surrounded myself in a pile of hoarder's delight. At least that's what it looks like. I have curated an installation to evoke sentimentality and nostalgia. If you look closely at the objects in this space, the dates, interests, and history don't match up. There are photos from the 50's, comics from the 80's, and toys from the 90's.

My project is inspired by my grandma's home, a house filled with old knick-knacks; it is also inspired by movies and t.v. shows that feature bedrooms filled with "stuff." Sentimentality is a feeling that can't always be explained. This work offers an outlook into what can evoke these emotions.

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My grandparents are first generation immigrants. Their parents came to New York City from Europe in the early 20th century in search of a new life. To my surprise, they ended up staying in New York their entire lives -- Long Island and Rockland County to be exact. Being that they grew up without technology, my grandparents had a completely different upbringing. Instead of storing photos and music on the Cloud, they have photo journals, albums, slides, negatives, and records. When I visit my grandparents' houses, it is almost as if I have stepped back in time. Antiques, photos, and *tchotchkes* flood the room. I wasn't alive in the 50's, but when looking at photos taken from 1950 I instantly feel a sense of nostalgia. The rooms in my dad's parents house's basement are amazing. Each room is filled to the brim with memories. There are books from my uncle's colleges, clothing, photos, toys, Christmas decorations, journals, tools, and machines. With a few glances around the room, it is as if I am looking into 50 years worth of memories in one moment.

What do our possessions say about our life? Is there significance in holding onto objects from the past? I believe the objects we buy, collect, and hoard over time can speak volumes about who we are as people. Russell Belk believes so, as expressed in his writings *Are We What We Own?*. He talks about how material possessions are both stimulating to the brain and heart. He references other writers such as William James (1890) who says, "A man's self is the sum total of all that he can call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands, and yacht and bank-account. All these things give him the same emotions." James is arguing that all of the things that consist in a person's life should be equally regarded as the factors that amount to who we are. But can't one argue that it is only our soul and body that truly define us? Yes, but we place a portion of our soul into every object we care about. For example, when we travel to new places, often there are souvenir stores to remember the good memories and positive feelings associated with this place, items to be stored in the future as a remembrance of past experience. Also, when we receive something from someone important to us we often associate that "thing," such as a letter or gift, with the person, thus placing the important feelings we have for those people onto the object.

Is it a bad characteristic to feel emotional attachments to useless objects? Possibly, and this is where a consumer faces the danger of converting into a hoarder. Hoarders are people who feel a compulsive need to keep everything they purchase and find. In extreme cases, hoarding can even cause health issues due to a influx of objects flooding their home. The concept of being a hoarder is often frowned upon in society, but in actuality, hoarding is a mental illness and the victims of which should not be blamed for their irrational behaviors. Hoarders are the extremity of the concept "You Are What You Own." In order to understand our own personal stories with our possessions, it is helpful to understand those in far more severe circumstances. The Anxiety and Depression Association of America argue, "People hoard because they believe that an item will be useful or valuable in the future. Or they feel it has sentimental value, is unique and



**Photo 1: My Grandmother, Lisa, age 10, New York**

irreplaceable, or too big a bargain to throw away. They may also consider an item a reminder that will jog their memory, thinking that without it they won't remember an important person or event." So, the basis of hoarding is a more heightened and detrimental version of most consumers.



**Photo 2: My Grandma's home in Long Island**



It is often difficult for many to decipher the difference between hoarding and collecting. Is there a difference? Collectors and hoarders are similar in the sense that they both possess "unnecessary to living" items, but the reasons that drive them to do so differ completely. Hoarding is evoked by depression and anxiety, while collecting is

driven entirely by a sense of interest, happiness, and pride. However, the two stretch even across a fine line. In 2011, the New York Times published an article entitled, "When Collecting Becomes Hoarding." The article not only speaks about the two as the dictionary defines them, but also speaks about the stigmas and misconceptions that are often associated with both. It says, "One misconception about the difference between collecting and hoarding is the idea that collectors save things of value and that hoarders save trash." Many people believe that hoarders just compile filthy crap, but hoarding can attribute to any type of belonging -- this can range from a bag of chips to thousands of dollars in jewelry. The difference is not the items they collect, but the feelings associated with them. When collecting becomes hoarding, motivation to display items is lost, and people become fearful of others seeing, touching, or even commenting on their belongings.

Is it really that important to strip all objects we own down to the essentials? I do not necessarily believe so. I think if someone wants to make this choice in their lifestyle they should. However, it has become shamed upon in society to have "clutter" and non-essential items. This is not to be confused with mass amounts of flashy things such as jewelry, cars, and fancy wine, which are viewed in society as signs of wealth. What bothers me about the trend and ideology of "Less is more" is that the people who own many "unnecessary" possessions do not necessarily own them to create clutter or waste, but rather store memories that fade with time. What is the point of buying something meaningful only to throw it away later?

When it comes down to it, our memories only last so long. "Most of us don't have any memories from the first three to four years of our lives. In fact, we tend to remember very little of life before the age of seven. And when we do try to think back to our earliest memories, it is often unclear whether they are the real thing or just recollections based on photos or stories told to us by others," says Jeanne Sinskey, a psychologist and Director of the Royal Holloway Baby Lab at the University of London. We don't remember anything from our childhood due to a



phenomenon of “childhood amnesia.” Photos, toys, clothing and other objects are essential in assisting those who yearn to glance back to their earliest years of life.

Our possessions define us, not necessarily for the object’s intended purpose, but because of the meaning we place on them. It will always be a controversial subject and there will always be a side arguing that our belongings have nothing to do with who we are, but I believe if you look into this idea on a deeper level you can see that it’s not so much the objects themselves at all, but rather the feelings that they carry. For example, if I were to buy a cup in Peru, the cup would remind me of my trip; however, if we strip down the cup to its essential purpose, the cup



**Photo 3: My Grandmother's Basement in Long Island**

serves and stands for nothing else rather than a beverage holder. It is the person who places meaning on the object, but it is the object that holds that meaning for as long as the person holds onto it. The same concepts can be applied to other things such as decorating and interior design. The specific sentimental items one chooses to decorate their home/room can say a lot about who they are and what their interests are. For example, at Oxbow everyone’s dorms have walls covered in specials photos of friends and families, little trinkets from home, and more. In our dorm everyone’s room’s can speak a little bit for who each kid is. It’s a fascinating experience being able to look into someone’s life through their possessions and I hope to do the same with the following generations of my family in the future. I find it quite amazing how

objects from the past allow us to momentarily time travel and see into the past of another generation. Similar to a time capsule these objects present an idea of preserving something whether it be a memory, a person, or a feeling.

My grandparents are all amazing people who hold onto insightful and beautiful stories of the past. We have objects in our home from every one of my grandparents; each object holds a great significance. I remember my Grandma Julie telling me stories of when she lived in New York City; my Great Grandpa owned an antique shop. She told me he would sell a variety of things including old furniture and soda pop. My other Grandma, Lisa, came to America when she was very young. She was a Jew living in Germany and the dangers of her staying were far too high to live a normal life. She fled with her family on a small boat and we still have the dress she wore to America, framed in our house. To the people who come to our house to visit, they see a dress, but my family sees the opportunity and blessing my Grandma had when she fled to America. We also have the suitcase that she brought to America. My



**Photo 4: My Great Grandfather in front of his store.**

mother ended up using this suitcase for travel. My Grandpa Jack used to work for Barbie as an artist for merchandise, we still have a t-shirt he made for them; sometimes my sister or mother will wear it to sleep. In addition, my Grandpa Funzi handed down a collection of books to my father that we have on shelves in our basement. These objects remain in our home as a reminder of our loved ones.

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