



BARB FLEMINGTON
 Barb Flemington is a visual artist, educator and advocate for the arts. She lives and works in her country studio near Brandon, Manitoba and has received awards from the Manitoba Arts Council and the Canada Council in support of her work. Flemington is excited by the animation of marginal or overlooked spaces. Most recently she completed a site-specific project at Brandon University Library and a residency with Mentoring Artists for Women's Arts (MAWA). She was a founding member of the Coterie of Malcontents. Barb works with found objects, archives and histories of place.

All images are:
Studio installations, mixed media with found and natural objects, 2012-2014, photographs by Kevin Bertram.

SPECIMEN GARDENS **BARB FLEMINGTON**

CURATED BY NATALIA LEBEDINSKAIA
APRIL 3 - JUNE 7, 2014

ART GALLERY OF SOUTHWESTERN MANITOBA
710 ROSSER AVENUE, UNIT 2
BRANDON, MANITOBA. R7A 0K9

In Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, Marco Polo describes his voyages to the emperor who has commissioned him to explore uncharted territories and cities of his empire. The cities are mythical, full of unimaginable sights, and obeying their own laws - repeating themselves, existing only in representations, or following time in reverse. Initially, Marco Polo does not speak the Emperor’s language, so has to relay the stories of his travels in objects and gestures. As he learns the language and begins to talk about his discoveries, the magic of the early stories is lost. No longer open for interpretation, the objects brought from the invisible cities cannot speak for themselves.

Invisible Cities resonates with Barb Flemington’s studio practice and consequent work in *Specimen Gardens* in its emphasis on allowing objects to have a voice and to convey whole worlds through simple gestures of transformation and placement. Flemington has been building and arranging collections as a private studio practice for many years. The experiences, places, and times that she describes throughout the exhibition seem both faraway and familiar. As if rescuing these things from their mundane fate in drawers, archives, or basements, she chooses to incorporate them into her specimen gardens. The slight modifications - gold leaf, scrimshaw, or drawing - only make them into more potent storytellers. The elements are assembled from realms adjacent to the artist’s: her father’s upholstery business; the woods behind her house in Brandon Hills; the many private lives of women who have used the powder, blush, and eye shadow compacts. Brought together into the gallery, they begin to overlap into a fluid assemblage that combines recollection with imagining, infusing memory with alchemy and myth.

The flow between exactitude and chance, as well as the sense of precision in the placement and distribution of the elements, foregrounds intent. Flemington traces this impulse back to the manicured gardens and attendant buildings looked after by the Niagara Parks Commission in Niagara Falls, Ontario, where she grew up. She spent many hours wandering through the contained gardens where order was imposed on nature. In contrast, long hikes along the Niagara Escarpment led her into undisturbed nature where the cycles of life and death were open for her childhood exploration. The opposition between wilderness and control permeates the exhibition through the domes of living moss, the delicate taxidermy birds, cut up pinecones, or a fragile butterfly wings.

Flemington’s installation constructs an imagined space through these specimen gardens of obsolescence and small histories. The constant organic rearrangement of found objects, occurring throughout the exhibition, creates new habitats and contexts for our perception and imaginative projection. The specimen gardens suggest a vanishing world in which all the pieces - utilitarian and imaginary, familiar and strange – once had a purpose. Their rearrangement within the installation speaks to traditions of preservation and display, from cabinets of curiosity to natural history museums, where material traces are kept preserved and on display, and where passage of time is traced through the shifts between familiarity and strangeness, balanced between recognition and nostalgia.

Natural history museums derive from the 17th century practice of creating cabinets of curiosities, which can be traced back to collections of sacred relics held by churches and monasteries. Such objects were housed in ornate reliquary boxes and were believed to possess

special powers of performing miracles and curing the sick. This lineage is never far away in Flemington’s work, where all the elements appear purposeful and capable of action. While instruments like magnifiers, measuring devices, index cards, or classification systems suggest an empirical reading, their arrangement and treatment appears to be emotive and moved by intuition.

Flemington presents many of her collections as explorations of the relationships between containment, simulation, and display of living things. In these negotiations, her work flows effortlessly between the living and the dead. Birds and snails once inhabited the nests and shells; flowers and herbs grew in a backyard; and the fragile little birds from the B.J. Hales Collection were once alive.[i] Two Price Warblers from this collection are study skins, while their counterparts are perched on twigs and are made to appear alive. In contrast to the unmistakably dead study skins, they are contained under individual domes as if they can fly away at any moment. Altogether, the pieces constitute a complex still life, the French term for which is *nature morte* (literally *dead nature*), where the constantly moving creatures are held still for viewing, but their stillness acts as a reminder of the cycles of life and death and the fragility of all living things.

However, Flemington’s installation does not exist solely in a nostalgic past, nor is it a forewarning of the inescapable cycle of life. The specimen gardens and their occupants testify to a constant flow of materials that continues beyond obsolescence, offering a glimpse of immortality. As a viewer, one is held simultaneously in multiple places, suspended between former lives of the artifacts and their current reactivation in the gallery. This is where the subtle alterations are so necessary, such as the gold leaf on the grid of thorns, or a makeup compact filled with beads to replace pink powder. These subtle changes reflect back onto the unaltered objects, allowing us to see them anew.

A slide projector hums in the gallery changing slides every five minutes. The sound immediately takes me back to Art History lectures where canonic art pieces were meticulously analyzed and discussed, slides were turned around and exchanged, carousels switched. My mind instantly moves to identify individual works, a task made difficult by discoloured images and silhouettes of foliage cut into the projection surface. The light falls onto the back wall through the cut parts of the screen to create a constantly shifting landscape on the wall. The slides, once so intimately tied to the masterpieces they represented, become autonomous as images and as sources of colour and light. The pink tones that remain after all other pigments have faded are no longer unwanted, but echo the other splashes of the colour throughout the exhibition: the pink blush compacts, pink sea urchins, and the red thread from Fleming-ton’s father’s upholstery supplies.

Flemington began collecting vintage blush and powder compacts over ten years ago. They connect directly to women who have used them or kept them in drawers and purses. While we cannot access these individual histories, they remain as visually stunning in their craftsmanship as they are emotionally charged with a sense of loss. There is a piercing recognition that particles of this exact powder, in its luminous pink or delicate beige, rested on a woman’s face. This tie is made stronger by the inaccessibility of the stories and the anonymity of their owners. Flemington’s gestures that transform them are able to craft new histories, giving them new lives that create a thread that connects back to their past.

Objects in *Specimen Gardens* trigger recollection through their material links to the past. For example, a small silver compact becomes a rudimentary camera. Originally, it released light powder through slits that could be slid open with a miniature handle. This mechanism becomes the shutter. Photosensitive paper is inserted into the compact, the shutter is opened and closed, and the paper develops a faint blue image that resembles a reflection of the sky moving through venetian blinds. The compact’s original owner filled it with powdered sheets, sliding it open to deposit light white powder onto her skin using the same gestures as this simple photographic process.

Flemington’s installation practice is deeply informed by photographic theory, and the place that photographs occupy between memory and imagination, moving between preservation and loss. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes describes a family photograph that moved him so deeply that he cannot reproduce it in the text for fear that others would see it as a mundane image of two children. It is an image of his mother as a little girl standing in a glass conservatory holding her brother’s hand. Because the photograph does not appear in the text, we are left to imagine the scene. The humidity of the winter garden must have gathered as condensation on the windows in the background, making the glass seem frosted. The winter garden is lush with vegetation contained in these humid and warm conditions away from the cold winter air. Much like a photograph, it is a small universe that refutes the natural cycle of life and death. And like the pieces of moss that Flemington collects in the woods behind her studio every fall and nurtures through the winter under glass domes, the plants in the winter garden are able to briefly escape death.

Backed with silver leaf through the ancient technique of Verre Églomisé after being salvaged from the recently renovated Kennedy Block in downtown Brandon, a frosted window leans on the gallery wall. It stands in place of the missing winter garden photograph, encapsulating the fragility of life and the yearning for the safety and containment of childhood memories expressed by Barthes in Camera Lucida. Like the absent photograph, the specimens throughout the installation trigger moments of recollection that parallel Flemington’s own remembering and nostalgia. They insist that we must care for the traces of lives that we inherit, as we are now the keepers of these often mythical, murky, and strangely familiar objects.

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ISBN: 978-1-927076-11-8
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[i] Benjamin Jones Hales was born in Ontario in 1869, and moved to Manitoba just before the turn of the century. He accumulated a large collection of Manitoba plants and animals, which eventually became the foundation for the B. J. Hales Museum of Natural History. The Collection was permanently installed at Brandon University from 1965 until 2009, and is now housed at the Brandon General Museum and Archives.

LIST OF WORKS

Museum Case, Price Warblers from the B.J. Hales Collection (Held by the Brandon General Museum and Archives), compact collection, found object, mixed media, 2014
Compositions on Linen, Found and natural objects on linen boards., 2012-2014
Storm Glass, Verre églomisé on salvaged storm windows from the Kennedy Block, 2014
South West Assiniboine, Map, archive tissue, upholstery thread, 2014
Thorn Wall, Thorns, feathers, thread, gold leaf, 2014
Camp W, Mixed media with sea urchins, 2009
Found object with nests, 2014
Etched glass magnifiers, 2013-2014
Projection Screen, Art History slides from the AGSM Resource Centre, 2014
Typewriter, Vintage typewriter, typing table and chair, piano scroll, upholstery hardware, dried plants, 2012-2014
3-Part Shelf, Yellow Warbler from the B.J. Hales Collection, objects found at the AGSM, 2014
Compact Collection, Compacts, compact powder applicators, weaving patterns found at the AGSM, 2000-2014
Museum Table, Optic instruments, dental tools, pyrometric cones, tooth, pine needles and pinecones, moss, compacts, inks, paper pieces, acorns, chestnuts, deer hair, retro tools, upholstery hardware, drawings, bark, corks, piano keys, sugar bowl with magnifying glass, jewelry, shells, thorns, feathers, rocks, cut glass, insulin tubes, coaster, books, nests, thread, binoculars, cards, lichen, silver plate tin type photograph, ribbon, paint chips, drapery clips, handmade paper, fabric samples, mica, American Goldfinch from the B.J. Hales Collection, 2014