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Break down



This book chronicles my portable possessions in a series of watercolour portraits. Not everything, but enough to create an anecdotal history. Why am I doing this?

In 2001 the artist Michael Landy destroyed everything he owned, at C&A in Oxford Street. The ‘exhibition’ was called Break Down and Landy gathered together all his ‘stuff’, ranging from postage stamps to his car, and including all his clothes and works of art by himself and others (some valuable),

painstakingly catalogued all 7,227 of them in detail, and then destroyed them all in public. The process of destruction was done on something resembling an assembly line in a mass production factory, with a dozen workers relegating each item to its basic materials and then shredding, pulping or reducing them to grains. It all went to landfill in Essex.

I didn’t go to watch, but 45,000 people did, fascinated, I imagine, by the thought that someone could reduce not just their hard-earned possessions to nothing, but their memories as well! Family photographs, love letters, a childhood teddy bear, a sheepskin jacket, a valued Saab, his passport and birth certificate, diaries, tax records, as well as an old face flannel due for the bin anyway. The message struck me at the time as similar to Peer Gynt’s quest to define the self by peeling back all the onion skin layers of the outer self to reveal the inner corm. What Michael Landy seemed to be doing was saying we don’t need to surround ourselves by all these trappings. Not only that, but that the planet cannot sustain a populace where every individual has some 7,227 belongings; we should all pare down. But in so doing quite so drastically, he seemed to me to be obliterating his material existence to the point of total annihilation. I believe he got some sort of grant to make this happen – an expensive operation in itself. One presumes he did not leave himself naked, homeless and starving but kept only what is necessary to sustain life. Apparently he found the experience joyful and liberating.

So much so that he then went abroad with his entourage of destruction and persuaded other people to climb a ramp and throw their own stuff into a giant tip. I saw that on television, and though Google tells me

it was only other artists disposing of their own bad art I am not sure of that. At any rate, stripping yourself of stuff and feeling the better for it is nothing new; Greek philosophers did it, the Buddha did it, medieval hermits did it. After all, the human spirit and the intangibility of beliefs must be more important than the flock of contrivances that flutter around one’s existence, mustn’t they?

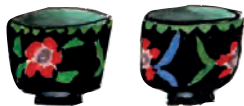
Am I content that I am defining my life by whatever is held in an inanimate object, as if memories must be held on to and if the thing that holds them goes, then a part of me will go with it? In Stephen’s mother I have seen how loss of memory shatters the essence of a person. Her dementia meant that not only her own treasured objects (she was a collector too) held no meaning, but her family lost hold of her when she eventually did not even recognise her own son.

Michael Landy does not mention the important people in his life, does not weigh up stuff against relationships. Break Down is only about material objects. Yet breakdown has a mental meaning too, and one in which those closest to you play a vital part. Clearly he had friends. One gave him a CD as a present five minutes after his last item was mangled. I suppose he will have built up again and acquired a player to hear it on in the intervening years.

It’s significant that Landy calls his event Break Down rather than Break Up. One thing puzzles me. Landy spent three years in cataloguing and describing all his 7,227 objects and, interestingly, this catalogue was not destroyed, and – even more significantly – is in a museum now. So all that self-defining stuff remains a matter of record and its individual biographies continue to exist. What then was the point of etherising them all?

Though I did not go to the Oxford Street happening, it stuck in my imagination for years and now I have decided to do the opposite. Or to be more accurate, a percentage of the opposite. To record in watercolours some of my things and then to tell the story of what they all mean to me. Write their biographies, as it were, and in the process a little bit more about my own. I don’t feel I have sufficiently accounted for myself. I have tried once through recipes and a second time via Easter eggs and Christmas cards. Animating the inanimate is perhaps a way of looking into the past. It is a kind of a ‘break down’ in its way – a breaking down of different facets of the self through the choices of what one surrounds oneself with. You can breathe your own life into material things: they can’t answer back, they can’t let you down, they don’t die.

Those 7,227 items seem modest; if every single thing counts, every postcard, every pencil, every plate then it’s undoubtedly a great deal more. I certainly could not paint the portraits of every single possession.



I don't want to. Not like the artist Lee John Phillips who is drawing every single nut, bolt and fret-saw blade left in his grandfather's shed when he died – more than 100,000 items – and who has RSI as a result of making meticulous line drawings over a period of four years. I am limiting myself to the small items that sit on mantelpieces, dressers, or every available surface in all

the rooms of my house. I am selecting those pieces I collect around me because of the meaning they have for me and the stories they tell. Why I like them around me to look at. Who I was with when I bought them and what they tell me about a phase of my life.

Some of them are not going to have their portraits recorded, either because I've done others like them or because (let's be honest here) they're just too difficult to do. At a certain point I might have to ask myself whether they haven't made it to my book because their presence doesn't 'spark the joy', as the internet declutter guru Marie Kondo designates those items whose time is up and which should be ejected from your house. I know at least two people who have set themselves up as declutter therapists. Yes, therapists. I wonder what they do that you can't do for yourself? Point out to you gently that you are indulging in anal retention, or what? As this book assembles itself, I have given a critical look at some runners-up that I haven't felt like painting and taken them to a charity shop without regret.

Perhaps this project is preparatory to the looming threat of having to 'downsize'; even (dreadful thought and don't let this happen to me) going into one room in a 'home'. At least I will be able to keep some favourites in this book. Meanwhile decluttering is not an object. My rules are very simple; if they answer affirmative to one of these three questions, they stay: Are they valuable? Are they in use? Are they sentimentally important? That's not quite the same as William Morris's stipulation that everything in the Red House must be 'useful' or 'beautiful'.

When I started I had a head of steam painting these possession portraits, and romped through the pages of a three-signature book of the finest watercolour paper – such a joy to paint on. It was Saunders Waterford cotton 356 gsm. Then I stalled because I couldn't find the same paper – correction: I could have ordered it, but I would have had to buy 100 imperial sheets. So I settled for 190 gsm, which is quite nice but doesn't give me the same pleasure. At around the same time, having already

done half the portraits in this book, I did a few sessions in botanical watercolour painting at the Linnean Society from which I learned so much about technique, colour, three-dimensionality, and light source that quite a lot of the first half started to look not-so-well observed to me. My painting style has always been to try and get the essence of a thing rather than the photographic accuracy, but now that I have learned to move from light tones to dark and build up the image, I hope the later portraits will retain the unforced life of my natural style while capturing more of a truth about the original object.

Collecting

The broader motivation is to try to work out why people like me collect. Is it to show the world what sort of a person we are by displaying the things we like so that they, in turn, can decide whether they like us? Is it to amass all the varieties of a particular class of object: be it birds' eggs, keys and locks, beer mats, silver spoons, teapots, opaque-twist ale glasses, playing cards, dolls' house paraphernalia, pressed flowers or the labels of all the different wines we have drunk? Or is it the chase of 'I haven't got one of those' (in a series) and the hope that surges in every antique market or auction house that you might find a variant – in my case an amber-coloured Victorian sherry glass like my green, amethyst, blue and cranberry ones? Or just the lust for ownership and the simple pleasure of looking at something you enjoy? To quote from the Antiques Roadshow on 7 July, 2019, 'Collecting is all about Pleasure with a capital P'.

And, as that programme amply demonstrates, some of that Pleasure is to do with the value of a thing, especially when it has increased over time. The punters are always amazed at what their heirlooms are worth. Almost always they profess that they will never sell them. But I'm willing to bet that at a certain point sentiment gives way to greed, and if an object can raise enough to provide a lifestyle change, then that is what the punters will go for. So I will occasionally note down what something cost or might be worth now. There's hardly anything saleroom-worthy (excepting some of the drinking glasses and the Malines Madonna on page 16) because I never spent enough for the financial appreciation to have become dramatic.

I have very little experience of the saleroom, so the adrenalin rush people get when their bid is successful is outside my experience. I am sure that is an element in the gamesmanship of a certain type of collector, and part of the fun of the chase. I have occasionally bought



18th-century glasses by putting in an absentee bid at Sotheby's, but that was so I wouldn't be tempted to bid any higher if I were in the room. My acquisitions are mostly from flea markets, specialist shops, inherited, or given.

I have identified seven types of collecting:

1. incidental or casual ownership of a few of the things in question;
2. more than just an accidental gathering of them, say up to 20 of modest size (more for postcards, fewer for cars);
3. a preference assemblage, where the owner keeps acquiring more of a series without regard to need or space;
4. a listing of events, experiences, things seen or done;
5. a serious corpus of objects of a kind, probably catalogued but not necessarily;
6. an accumulation for a one-off exhibition or in a museum, frequently donated from private collections;
7. an archive of everything, for academia, scientific knowledge, taxonomy and posterity.

I fall within the first four groups and that is what I will be talking about in this book.

I am talking about purposeful collecting, not hoarding which is a different thing altogether. Hoarding is arbitrary. Hoarding, as I understand it, is an inability to throw anything away – used envelopes, old bills, plastic bags, newspapers, rotting food and much, much worse. The distinction between purposeful collecting and amassing stuff by default can be quite a wavy line. I know I have far too much in my attic simply because it isn't in the way, and I can be accused of the hoarder's justification that, 'It may come in useful one day'. A lot of it is art material that might



trigger inspiration. So I have two drawers full of wrapping papers, a whole plan- chest of art papers, marbling and card, family artworks galore, dolls' and dollhouse things, wine corks, bits of glass, dead computer parts, camping gear and squash racquets, photo albums, boxes of photos, all my student notes, workshop files, and all sorts of things I ought to dispose of. In fairness, I did do a great deal of decluttering after Stephen died, and I was reasonably ruthless about books

(though there is one whole cupboard with novels three deep along its shelves). I must not to be too complacent about not being a hoarder.

Yet one makes mistakes when one throws things away. Memorably, I threw out my eldest daughter, Emily's, first pair of shoes (she'll never forgive me), all my childhood Pelham puppets (might have had some value), my reader's reports when I was a fiction reader for Penguin, and my own unfinished attempts at novels (not regretted), and years of diary/appointment books (which would have been useful as autobiographical triggers). A true hoarder is someone who can't find a pathway through rooms where papers and detritus is piled layers thick across the floor. That's not me: I've just got more stuff than it's fair to ask my children to deal with. Another reason for this book – if a thing isn't painted or mentioned then let them not feel guilt if it goes to house clearance.

Perhaps what a house contains acts collectively as a status symbol. I don't think that is what motivates my purchases, but one needs to self-question. I am fortunate not to live in an age when sumptuary laws dictated who was allowed to wear clothes of what colour or cloth. I don't live in an age governed by etiquette like the couple in the Arnolfini Portrait. Every item painted is symbolic of the couple's status: the chair, the shoes, the bed, the mirror, the rosary, the clothes. All is 'just so' and in perfect accord with what the merchant had achieved and wanted to show the world. I don't have to place strategic and decorative oranges in my reception room to show how wealthy I am, because four oranges are £1.25 from Sainsbury's and anyone can have them whereas, for Arnolfini the four oranges represent conspicuous display to show off his importance. Each age has its symbols of social achievement and we are quick



Art

I wasn't going to record the paintings I have all over the house: my skills are not up to it. There are too many as well, more than 100. They fill my walls, including some that once were bookshelves. I have been acquiring pictures over many years. Though you can lift them off the wall, they are not what I have said I am writing about, namely 'portable objects' with stories to tell. Yet it feels incomplete to leave them out so I am compromising with a selection of details of some of my favourite works. If there

is an associated narrative, I am writing it in, but most of the pictures are on my walls simply because I like them and that is all there is to say about them. With I think two exceptions, they are all original art works (including limited editions of etchings, aquatints and linocuts). I've nothing against reproductions, but it gives me some pleasure to have covered every inch of wall space with the real thing. It connects more closely to the hand that made them.



and a marbled fore-edge. Serious book craft.

The *crème de la crème* of our books is Thomas Mace, *Musick's Monument* (1676), a treatise on the lute. It was a present to Stephen for his 60th birthday from family and friends. When everyone had arrived we presented it to him in full view of the assembled company of donors and he was astonished and delighted. Our copy comes from the Sion Library, founded in 1623. The Library began without a founding collection, but by 1650 it already had over 6,000 volumes. Up until the 1950s Sion College Library was a general resources centre for London's clergy. It was also a copyright library from 1710 to 1836. Because of that, the book is virtually in mint condition, not having been used, though there is evidence of its having been in a chained library and the binding is newer than the book so it could have been presented as a sewn book block. This tallies with it being a subscription publication which lists the donors, who would have it bound to fit the style of their own libraries. So self-publishing isn't a new thing!

Stephen kept it wrapped in a faded sage-green velvet cloth and would



bring it out to unwrap with pride to show to special guests, but I have it out on the oak round table – why have things if you are going to hide them away.

The frontispiece picture is an engraving of Mace. When Stephen became Master of the Art Workers' Guild two months after his 60th I had a lot of fun photoshopping his face onto that of Mace and colouring the gown red to match the Master's robes as an invitation to Master's Night.

Sketchbooks have always been important too. Both of us had a notebook on the go in which we would scribble down ideas, both visual and verbal. His tended to be

pocket-sized moleskines whereas mine were all publishers' dummies that had come my way when I worked in publishing. They are full of notes of conferences I went to interspersed with doodles bred of boredom or designs for something. The Art Workers' Guild has Sketchbook Evenings from time to time and the only time I dared to exhibit was in the early stages of doing the watercolours for this book. 'Dared' because the work of other Brethren was so

impressive. I remember one architect whose sketch-



books were named after Roman emperors and who did measured drawings of bicycles: 'Drawing is a way of stealing things for yourself', I recall him saying. That does rather

Playing cards

I've got a whole drawer of sets of playing cards, plus a miniature set from a Christmas cracker that I keep in my coat pocket in case I get bored on a train journey. I have chosen six of the queens to paint [below] and it has given me an idea for the annual Tabletop Museum held at the Art Workers' Guild in Queen Square every September. The plan is to make a square of queens for the next one. But how to do that without breaking up the integrity of the pack?

Three of the cards I have painted are in the invitation to Vita's 40th – the cards scanned in this time – with her face Photoshopped as the queen. Nice invitation; not a great party! I had forgotten that I used this as a theme – which goes to show that one has a leaning in certain directions and the same preoccupations recur in one's endeavours. Bach and Vivaldi recycled themes – maybe it's the same dynamic that drives collecting in themes. Sally B puts it this way:

I suppose that preferences stay within people and so objects keep triggering desire in the same way. Like my niece who realised she kept buying brown skirts, having lost track of the ones she already had, and the fact that she didn't need another one. So she made a list to carry with her when shopping, to stop her going for the same things all the time.

That's what collectors are impelled to do – go for the same things all the time.

At one time I would buy packs of cards in the gift shop of museums I visited, but it got out of hand. Back in the day, there would be one pack in a small shop, but now there are just too many. The record-holder for this kind of collecting has 8,520 unique jokers and I suppose he has the rest of the pack too. We made a family pack of cards for Kate as a birthday present. I did the suit of diamonds, Gaby the spades and which of the girls painted the hearts? I can't remember and I can't find the pack, though it came to me after Kate's death.



Stephen made the box and painted the joker [below left]: that's one that Mr 8,520 won't have.

I don't see the point of wanting to have every single joker that was ever made: the fun of the chase maybe. I am, however, picking up playing cards that I find in the street and logging on the back where I found them – my first one was beside a bit of river with a view to the Taj Mahal. If I get to 52 of any suit I will call it a set, but so far I'm in single figures.

I am fortunate to have the hand of Jacks, done by my son, Gabriel, when he was nine for his friend Jack's ninth birthday. I thought it was exceptionally good but we had no scanners or digital cameras in those days so I couldn't record it. When I returned after the party to collect Gaby, I noticed with some dismay that the card was strewn on the floor with other cards, envelopes and wrapping paper. I'm afraid I scooped it up and tucked it quickly into my pocket. Maybe it had been appreciated but I didn't risk it. I hope he goes back to art one day; he was talented. Unfortunately the public school education system valued other talents more, and it was in a sense schooled out of him. His son has inherited that gift from both sides of his family and I hope he doesn't lose it to other interests.



As I sorted through my cards – some snap cards, some Happy Families, a set of tarot, something in German eluding identification and an intriguing detective game that must go back to my childhood because it is in 50s style – I was struck by how many sets in my collection depict men. There are no female police officers in the detective game; in fact the only women in the whole pack are victims of crime. In Snap, it's boys on tractors, farmers with hoes: no women, not even stereotypically

making cakes. Happy Families has to have the obligatory Mr, Mrs, Master and Miss; but in one set everyone is strikingly described by the job that Mr does. Mr Dough the Baker. Mr Lean the Butcher. Mr Sole the Shoemaker. No Mr Stitch the Dressmaker's Husband. And certainly no Mr Dram the Doctor's Mate. Even the standard four-suit pack has one female picture card to three of men. And this was the paradigm as I was growing up. Normal. We played card games as a family sometimes of a winter's evening when there was a fireside and only one warm room. I remember loving that. I can't imagine what it must be like to have grown up with the expectation that you could grow into Miss Screw the Engineer or Ms Livewire the Astrophysicist. Let alone They the Non-binary.

We often played Happy Families in my childhood with a set that my mother made, shown on the next page. It is from her that I get the 'take a line for a very quick walk' attitude to watercolours. Hers are all carefree ink-and-wash, spirit-of-the-thing, done-in-minutes jobs – and charming they are too. That set, what was left of it, Steven and I used as the front cover of a book called Happy Families we made for them in 1962 to celebrate their silver wedding anniversary. We did it together while they were in Italy on holiday as a surprise for their return. The book was digitised by the Holocaust Museum in Berlin and they made a CD which is in My Videos. Steven has the original book.

Were we a happy family in my childhood? Reasonably so earlier on I think, though my parents were for a long time in mourning for those they had lost in the Holocaust, which must have made things difficult. Plus my mother had not been well-parented herself and patterns of behaviour are so easily replicated unintentionally. I think she did her best to break out of the mould, and in one sense she succeeded because she enabled my brother and myself to take it one further. But she was a difficult woman, a depressive, over-bearing and controlling. I loved her as a small child, but as I grew up I had to break free. We all do. If you are lucky – and I do think I have been with my own children – then you can come together later as friends. But you have to let go as a parent if you want to keep them. She couldn't. Her tragedy is that we couldn't meet as adults. If I met her now – with the age and experience that I have in playing catch-up – we would like each other. I would understand her better. Even as I paint these playing cards I am expressing both how differently I am doing them and appreciating what she handed on to me with her pen-and-wash dish-dash way of painting. Mine try to be faithful to the real thing; she didn't want to look at things that closely. As I've said elsewhere, there's a virtue in capturing the feeling of a thing in expressive strokes, rather than meticulously measuring every angle with

Photoshop manipulation; pottery; puppet-making; raffia work; rag rugging; scraperboard; sculpture; silk-tie painting; silversmithing; smocking; spinning; *verre églomisé*; watercolours; waxed-cloth making; weaving; willow garden structure; wood-work.

Stephen was enrolled for a *mokume gane* class but was too ill to go. He did everything to a high standard of craftsmanship, but I was, and am, always the dilettante. I don't mind this any more (did once) because learning different techniques has been so interesting and has informed the way in which I collect. I can't put in the 10,000 hours of practice required to become an expert, but some ways of doing things rub off on a neighbouring craft. It's as if one acquires a library of touch that enables dexterity in unexplored areas of making. They say that after the first five languages you become fluent in, the next ten are much easier. So it is with making things. The symphony of manual capacities harmonising with visual and intellectual sensitivity creates a cumulative sound. I need that sound in my mental ear and that is why I always need to have a making project on the go. Even if it is just the dot of creativity involved in cooking for people.

I have sometimes thought that it is the process of making that attracts me and that once the thing is finished I lose interest in it. That is not entirely true. You lose the drive to carry on and feel something like the release of endorphins that an athlete experiences at the finishing line, but afterwards the item is still there. Often – correction: always – there's some detail you wish you had done differently. In my case, I am profoundly lazy and I will practically never undo something I've done wrong if I can get away with pretending it is an intentional fault and part of what gives the thing its zest.

There are a number of pieces I have made

that I like: indeed, am quite proud of. The more so if it is an original idea. By original, I don't mean arising out of nowhere, but one's own unique take on an idea, with a personal combination of elements that move it away from the source that germinated it and adds a surprise. Very few ideas, whether visual or intellectual, grow out of nothing, as Anne Fadiman demonstrates in her chapter 'Nothing New Under the Sun' in *Ex Libris*. Its subject is plagiarism and she footnotes where every single idea originated. She had observed:

that of all forms of theft, kleptomania was the one plagiarism most closely resembled. Unfortunately, I later discovered that this brilliant aperçu had already been apperceived by at least four other writers.

And she footnotes when she had the apperception and who the four other writers were.

These two optical illusion glass pieces are original enough, though I can footnote where the influences came from: both the engravers on the previous page for a start. I started by making what I called 'ghost bowls' because the ghost of the original is later trapped in molten glass. The technique uses glass frit – like granulated sugar – held together with wallpaper paste and called *pâte de verre*, literally 'paste of glass'. There are three or four bowls of increasing size picked up on a bubble of glass, and when they are polished you can see multiple 'ghosts' of the first form reflected in the polished surface of the top – exploiting the illusory qualities of the glass. Exploring illusion in glass is not original to me, many makers do that because it is an obvious quality of glass, but no one else was using *pâte de verre* to do it. If I had found glass and this technique in the 70s when I was trying to find myself, I would probably have become

a 'name', like glass-makers of the time who exploited one technique and became known for it. But I would never have done that, butterfly that I was, and does it matter?

So pictured are Tipped Egg Blue and Field of Flowers 2. I was pricing them at the time for £850 including the gallery mark-up, higher than other items because I didn't want to sell them. And that's why I have them now. What people don't realise is how much it costs to make something like this. I had to hire a furnace, plus gaffer and assistant, in Cornwall for 24 hours at a cost (ten years ago) of £850 a day, London rates being hugely higher. Plus petrol to get there and costing-in a B&B for two to three nights (though I always stayed with Susanna G in Plymouth). If you are lucky, you could make five successful pieces in a day, but not as complex as these two. If you

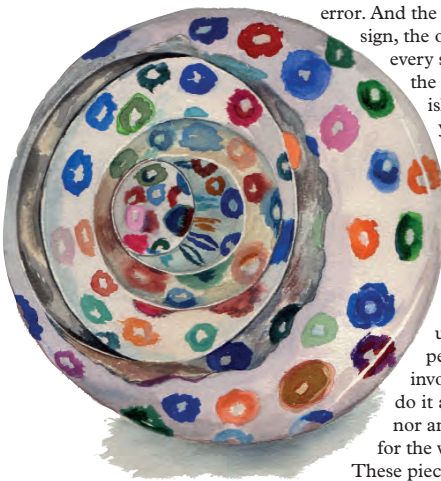


are unlucky, like Katharine C whose piece is on the previous page, you might do three days on the trot and then find that everything you made had melted in the lehr (where the pieces slowly anneal and cool down overnight). After that I would journey back home taking the pieces to a cold-worker near Frome (close to where Vita now lives) who would slice off the top to my specification and polish it to a high finish to get that lens-like surface on which the illusion depends. At that point, something else can go wrong – I’ve had a stress crack that came to light only when the front was polished, and of course it too was magnified and replicated in the polish of the lens. Cold-working and transport back to me would add £150-£200 to the cost of one piece. Then you have to factor in at least a day a week, and probably two, on the ancillary cost of being a working artist: paperwork; self-promotion; sitting about invigilating; buying materials and general down time. So a gallery fee of £850 for one item – remembering that between half and two-thirds of that goes to the gallery – doesn’t sound high any more.

You might say, in what sense have I made these two pieces, and the others like them? The original ‘ghost bowls’? Yes, entirely mine. And quite an elaborate process that I developed myself through trial and

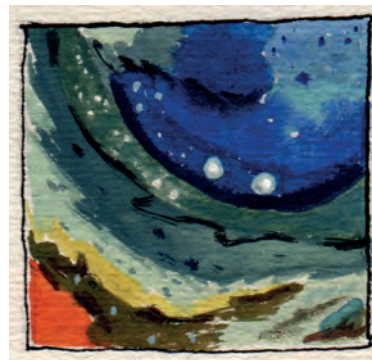
error. And the concept, the design, the orchestration of every stage of directing the blowing and finishing, mine too. If you can’t acquire 10,000 hours of practice in each craft you want to design for then you need to lean on the experience of others. I could do it because I understand and can perform every process involved. I just can’t do it as well as they do, nor am I strong enough for the weight of the glass.

These pieces are still my own work. So are the other rondels and



abstract glass sheets I still have.

On the right is a rendition of some high-class fine-art photography of abstracts from details of my *pâte de verre*-encased glass. Again, I did not manipulate the ultra-high resolution photographs, taken with a hired Hasselblad and cameraman, but I sat next to Gudawer K with Lightroom in front of us and we made the creative decisions together.

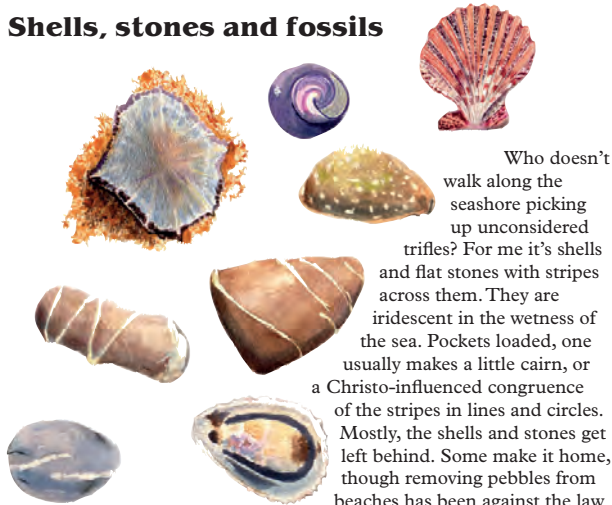


Nor was the idea to do this ours either; it arose in a steering committee with a thrown-out idea that someone suggested. I caught the ball and ran with it. The results are mine and Gudawer’s in equal measure. Three wall-sized prints are outside the lifts at the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital, and others are in the consulting rooms, while the rondels they are taken from spill across the wall at Reception in a piece called *Spinal Accord*. My rationale said (and notwithstanding my earlier disparagement of talking about your own work, I’ll quote it):

The use of circles is because of their primaevial appeal to adults and children, suggestive of ‘wholeness’ – being fully rounded. The design within the disks draws on X-rays of common orthopaedic problems, and abstracts from them. Jane says: ‘People in hospitals are happy, sad, rushed, relaxed, confident, frightened, brave, busy – I want to respond to every emotion with designed ambiguities that allow viewers to write their own stories upon the art.’

Writing your own stories upon objects is part of the fascination of collecting. When you are the maker, you are thinking about the respondent who will see the work. Not all of them want to own the result. And the collector will also appreciate the things they cannot have. The relationship between admiration and the lust for ownership is an interesting one. It is moderated by what you can afford, in the same way that fancying a film star or a real person adjusts itself to feasibility. It is with the real person that you have a continuing connection and that association over time is what makes the story. Falling for a public figure is a crush; and can crush you.

Shells, stones and fossils



Who doesn't walk along the seashore picking up unconsidered trifles? For me it's shells and flat stones with stripes across them. They are iridescent in the wetness of the sea. Pockets loaded, one usually makes a little cairn, or a Christo-influenced congruence of the stripes in lines and circles. Mostly, the shells and stones get left behind. Some make it home, though removing pebbles from beaches has been against the law

since I was five. I didn't know that. But more than a hundred years ago Edmund Gosse in *Father and Son* was already bemoaning the loss of wild-life and natural forms in rock-pools:

An army of 'collectors' has passed over them, and ravaged every corner of them. The fairy paradise has been violated, the exquisite product of centuries of natural selection has been crushed under the rough paw of well-meaning idle-minded curiosity.

A little harsh on the Barbara Hepworths of this world, perhaps, for whom they are inspirational. If Jim Ede had honoured that law, he might not have made his famous spiral of pebbles at Kettle's Yard. There is something magical about holding a rounded, sun-drenched pebble – truly it is 'infinity in the palm of your hand': a bit of the world weathered smooth by billions of years. No wonder so many people find such stones put them into contemplative mode. Shakespeare knew that in one of my favourite sonnets, the one beginning:

Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,
So do our minutes hasten to their end;
Each changing place with that which goes before,
In sequent toil all forwards do contend.

The position with shell-collecting is fuzzier: one should consider the eco-system, apparently, but it's not illegal in the UK (and *is* in Florida). Sometimes mine have gathered dust on a bathroom ledge. Now they are in a Mexican basket in a drawer. And I learn that placing sea shells on a windowsill will attract good energy – something to do with *feng shui*. Keeping sea shells in a basket will bring good luck and if you want real wealth, then decorate a water fountain with sea shells. A grotto is even better. So I've been doing the right thing in keeping them and we've visited grottoes encrusted with shells many a time so maybe that's brought us good fortune. There are more on the green plate on page 59.

The shell that was a treasure for some time is the nautilus which we had on a mantelshelf; a tiny drilled hole secured it to the wall. Stephen loved its Fibonacci replication and would wax lyrical for hours about the golden section and design. I think he bought the nautilus at the shell shop that used to be across from Foyles and gave the other half to the girl-friend he had at the time. I'm willing to bet she hasn't still got it and that, unlike me with the little cricket, she didn't see the person behind the gift.

There are a couple of ammonites somewhere and two trilobites, one of which I have attempted [next page]. It's been hidden away in a cupboard unregarded for some time, which seems uncaring for a fossil that is at least 250 million years old and therefore the oldest bit of 'stuff' that I have. There are also bits of quartz and geological mineral slices that Stephen acquired here and there.

A few have made their way to the Oxfam shop to reduce shelf clutter.

I don't suppose those who clear my house after me will believe I made any such attempts, but truly I did.



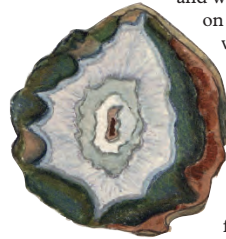


Silver, pewter and metal

Napkin rings

Nothing defines the unity of the nuclear family more than napkin rings. Old-fashioned now, I suppose, though with the now vogueish return to a no-waste culture perhaps they will come back in. At any rate, our family has always had our own separate rings and they get trotted out now whenever anyone comes to supper. While we were living together as a family they encircled the white damask serviettes I got from my mother and my aunt. They were part of the couvert at every supper. Not the tablecloths, though much valued, as it's too much laundry. White tablecloths for Christmas and special events.

The napkin rings I have painted are the five we used plus an ivory one which was one of a set of five I bought in a junk shop near Colindale newspaper library for 1/6 (how do you remember that, Jane? I don't know, but I just do). Only three left now; they have numbers on them and I fancy they were part of a hotel set. The horn one feels as if it has always been there, though I don't recall how. Emily's and Gaby's are hand-inscribed with their names



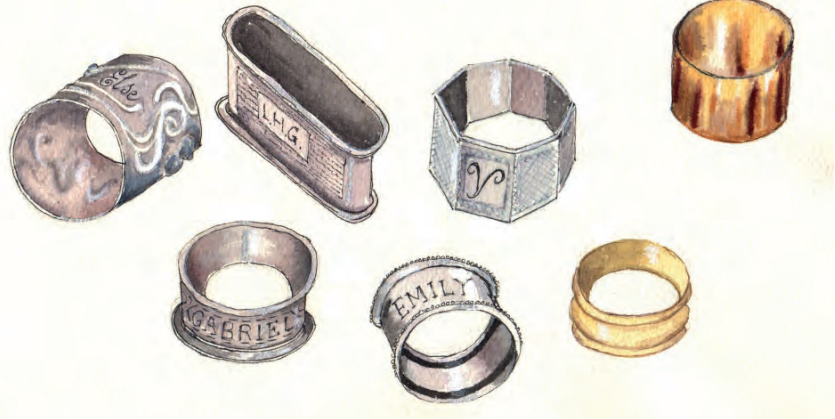
and we bought Vita's because it already had a V on it. Probably all bought in Camden Passage which was our bargain-hunting ground at around that time.

I don't think we knew when we bought them that the alternative name is 'christening bangle'. It used to be *de rigueur* to own a named napkin ring as a sign of belonging: symbolically a right to a place at the table. This extended from a family setting to the establishing seniority in the Royal Navy where senior naval officers had

silver rings engraved with the names of every ship they had served on.

I use my grandmother's art nouveau ring [far left], which bears her name, Else, and Stephen used his father's, engraved with his initials L.H.G. There's a matching one for Joan and three more silver ones including Lotte's with her name on it – Nick, Joachim and Georgia have these when they stay but I am not certain they claim ownership of any particular initialled design. It's their way of saying, we belong in this family without the need for formalisation. There is a quasi ancestor-worship in keeping a named napkin ring, as if one is keeping their memory at the table still.

It's just my silver ring now and you'd think I wouldn't need to bother. After all their use is to identify whose is whose until the napkin itself is due for the weekly wash. But it's part of civilisation for me to have mine on my red-lacquered-chinoiserie supper tray for my nightly TV dinner.

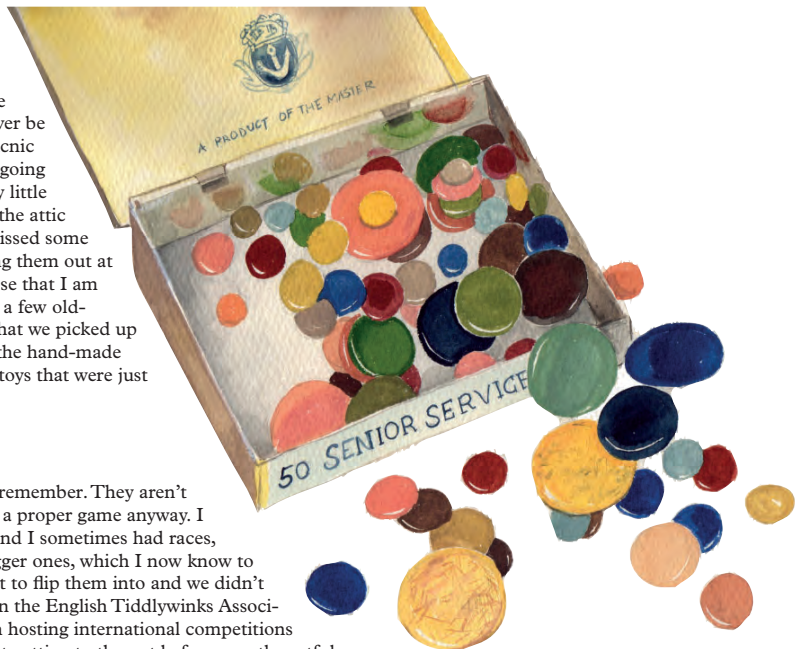


Toys

I've kept a lot of the children's toys for my grandchildren, and there is a secret stash of things I have bought for a putative grand-daughter that may never be given (not that boys can't play with tea-sets and picnic hampers but so far there is little interest). I'm not going to make a visual catalogue of all the cars, Lego, my little ponies, action men and all those things waiting in the attic till the grandchildren are the right age (and I've missed some that would have been current, only I forgot to bring them out at the right time). The things I am portraying are those that I am fond of. They are mostly my childhood things and a few old-fashioned children's toys made of wood or metal that we picked up on our travels (Mexico, Germany, France), liking the hand-made ones rather than the Fisher Price hardcore plastic toys that were just coming into vogue when our children were born.

Tiddlywinks

These have been in my family for as long as I can remember. They aren't a proper set, but then I don't think we played it as a proper game anyway. I largely remember playing it solo; perhaps Steven and I sometimes had races, but all we did was flip the winks along with the bigger ones, which I now know to be called 'squidgers'. We didn't have a mat or a pot to flip them into and we didn't divide them up into colours and teams as you do in the English Tiddlywinks Association, which publishes *Winking World* and has been hosting international competitions since I was little. I learn that to stop your opponent getting to the pot before you, the artful move is to 'squop' them (good one for Words with Friends), which means you flip your wink on top of theirs to stop them playing it. As the game progresses you can then attempt a manoeuvre called the 'boondock' which is a bit like foot-on-the-ball croquet (permitted in East Horsley rules where I learned to play), whereby your piece stays where it is while sending your rival's into the bushes. Shame we didn't know all that or it might have held our attention for longer than it did, but this set is burned into my memory in the way that only things you had early in life can do. I think it must be made of an early form of plastic, possibly Bakelite, or maybe that's too early – not sure how you can tell. I know I had my favourites: the big yellow ones (and if they are plastic what's that patina on them?) and a small thin blue-grey one that could jump quite far. They were always kept in this Senior Service tin, which must have been my father's, though his usual cigarettes were Players. I've seen this tin on eBay for £28, though probably not scratched with the words 'cards' on the front – did I do that, and if so why?



Same era as this (and where is my set?) is pick-up sticks or spillikins which we played as a family, though I remember most clearly playing with my father, who had a certain thumb technique that I tried to emulate. Not that he was good at the game – too impatient and possibly itching to do something more intellectually stimulating. We usually played this on the floor, which will be challenging for me now when the grandsons are old enough to play.



the hoarder trap, but in the case of the button box the association is more with play than with utility.

Bricks

Bricks. Lots of them. The page I did has the German bricks I grew up with foregrounded. I loved making villages and homesteads with these. And I loved clearing them away because that was a puzzle in itself as you had to fit them to the templates on each of the three layers. Some rhomboids gave particular satisfaction when you got the placing right. Also on the page are some of a set Stephen made, the

Cuisenaire rods we had to teach the children maths, a plastic set with coloured shapes of unremembered provenance, and Cuboro which we bought late in life. Stephen would have looked forward to making marble runways with his grandsons and would have made or bought more, so fabulous constructions could be devised. Visiting older children get tempted by this set, which lives under the sideboard so it is near at hand.

The German building bricks are made in the 1940s and what you can make with them tells of an idealised Germany of charming villages in a romanticised past.

Whatchamacallits

Whatchamacallits are fanciful playthings of a sort, though the exact word for what they are might not jump to mind. There might be more than necessary dotted about the house. There's an argument for saying if you don't know what it is then you don't need to have it.

Christmas objects fall into this category and are redolent with childhood memories. They come out once a year to decorate the tree or the table and are welcomed like old friends.

The pair of walking Christmas boots came from somewhere now forgotten and they are a bit of fun.



The little toy drum is one of the baubles that have hung on trees I have known for as long as I can remember. Might have

emigrated with my parents. My box of tree decorations went down to Vita's house for Christmas last year, and as I put this one up on her tree I wondered if I would ever do my own again and whether they might be staying with her. This little drum might then get lost amidst more slick and glossy acquisitions and that would make me sad. It is a part of Christmas for me. Joined later by Emily's fairy, some varnished bread angels, the last of the tinted glass



I am reminded by the day's entry of the time I appeared in the *FT*'s 'How To Spend It' and the nightmare of making a piece in a hurry and sending it to Dubai post haste. I was part of an online gallery and we were contracted to satisfy customers within a period of three to five days. Nightmare! I don't look at my blog often, but it is comforting that that period of my life is logged – all the glass exhibitions I was ever in – and still there and does not occupy any space.

Pinterest

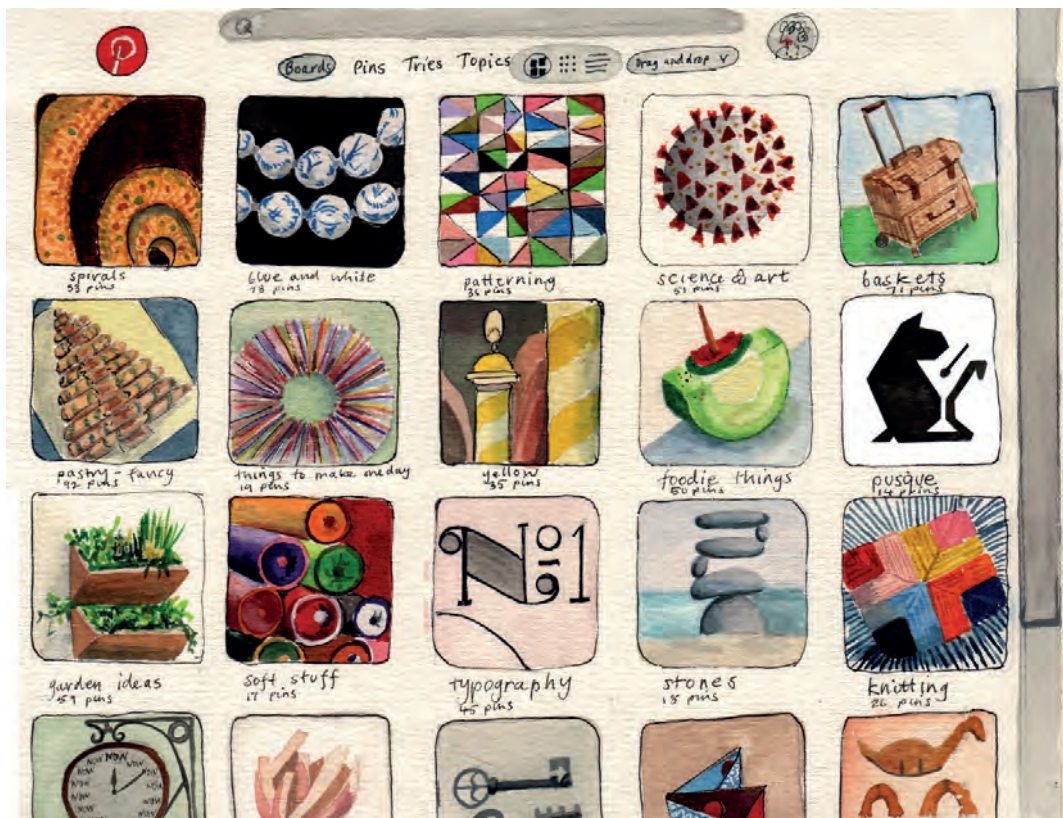
Some people have their collections on Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, Flickr, Dropbox, Smug-mug, Picasa, and I don't know where else. The only one I populate regularly is Pinterest. It's an occasional Sunday morning activity, when I have breakfast in bed, read *The Week*, play 'Words with Friends' and if I still don't feel like getting up then I collect up a few more pictures for my boards.

What I am doing is cataloguing physical objects that I own. There

is an overlap in Pinterest where you 'pin' a thing that 'interests' you to a virtual board. Mine comprise [from left to right and top to bottom in the picture]:

spirals; blue and white; patterns (man-made); science and art; baskets; things to make one day; yellow; foodie things; pusque; garden ideas; soft stuff; thing things; stones; knitting; time; edible containers; keys; card ideas; to make with children and, not shown, patterns (natural); roses of a different kind and random things I like.

Fourth along, representing the Science and Art board, is the corona virus, which is also my Easter Egg for 2020. I've added the comment, 'How can something so beautiful be so deadly'. I have done the layout of this book during the lockdown for the pandemic. It's too early to assess



Interesting that lutes are specifically singled out!

This would purge you of all that was good for the body but bad for the soul and in so doing would prevent the end of the world, lest it be destroyed, I can only suppose, by the wrathful deity that created it. Even Botticelli (though this is in dispute) is said to have burned some of his own paintings long before Landy got fellow artists burning theirs. And some people think that the Extinction Rebellion group is advocating a similar approach by demanding government interventions to restrict today's luxury items, such as eating red meat and travelling by aeroplane, in order to maintain a planet in which today's children can grow up and live.

Not that the concept of sin means anything to me, and I doubt whether it did to Landy. Yet possessions such as I am illustrating and talking about in this book are vanities.

And I do not mind if they are.

Stuff

I've concentrated on the substantiality of stuff. So that includes all these, collected up from lots of sources (Roget doesn't have them all):

antiques, artworks, ballast, baubles, belongings, bibelots, bic-a-brac, bijoux, bits and pieces, bygones, clobber, clutter, collectables, collectibles, curios, doodahs, effects, equipment, folderols, fossils, frippery, gear, gewgaws (also geegaw), gimcracks, goods and chattels, heirlooms, impedimenta, junk, kickshaws, kit, knick-knacks, luggage, materials, museum pieces, novelties, objects, objets trouvés, ornaments, paraphernalia, period pieces, playthings, possessions, relics, tackle, tchotchkes, things, this and that, toys, trappings, treasures, trifles, trinkets, tsackes, valuables, vintage, vertu, whatyamacallits, whatnots, whirligigs.

Depending on your point of view, these are celebratory or pejorative. 'Stuff' is a vague term and, as such, a bit of a chameleon. One might say, 'I'm going through a lot of stuff at the moment,' which means that unwelcome things are happening in one's life, whether external or internal. They've 'knocked the stuffing out of you' seems to imply that you aren't quite yourself. Or maybe whatever it is that is worrying you is just 'stuff and nonsense'. Even so, socialising can be an effort, so you might wriggle out of an engagement by saying, 'I've got a lot of stuff to do'. Conversely, as part of a team you might be playing your part because, 'If everyone does their stuff, we'll all succeed.' There's a pleasurable expertise in 'knowing your stuff', though unfortunate if they've 'heard all this stuff before'. Let's hope you didn't 'stuff yourself' afterwards, nor that you had your 'trousers stuffed inside the tops of your boots' as that could give a worse impression than 'a wallet stuffed with dollars'. I could go on, but let's leave the last word to Shakespeare:

We are such stuff
As dreams are made on; and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.





stuff
/stʌf/

antiques, artworks, ballast, baubles, belongings, bibelots, bic-a-brac, bijoux, bits and pieces, bygones, clobber, clutter, collectables, collectibles, curios, doodahs, effects, equipment, folderols, fossils, frippery, gear, gewgaws (also geegaw), gimcracks, goods and chattels, heirlooms, impedimenta, junk, kickshaws, kit, knick-knacks, luggage, materials, museum pieces, novelties, objects, objets trouvés, ornaments, paraphernalia, period pieces, playthings, possessions, relics, tackle, tchotchkes, things, this and that, toys, trappings, treasures, trifles, trinkets, tsackes, valuables, vintage, vertu, whatdyamacallits, whatnots, whirligigs.

The average household apparently holds 300,000 items – stuff of one kind or another. Some of that comprises toasters, tin-openers, saucepans, scissors, bicycles, biros, elastic bands, and the nuts and bolts of individual interests. My home has accumulated stuff over a period of 40 years – some of it fine craftsmanship; some of emotional value; some capturing a moment in time; some destined for Oxfam. This book tells their story and, in so doing, a little bit of my own.

It is a personal book with reminiscences scattered amongst fact and social history. Family and friends march unapologetically across its pages. It is also an attempt to discover the psychology of collecting: why some people own every example in an abstruse field, with museum-curators' knowledge to back it up, while others have a salt-and-pepper approach, gathering a little bit of this and a little bit of that on assorted travels. The book considers the boundaries between connoisseurship and hoarding; taste and clutter; treasured objects and unregarded gifts. It combines philosophical musings with an interest in how things are made and what they symbolise in their originating cultures.

The text is illustrated with 420 watercolours by the author of her own collection of things.

